ANTHEM BIOWARE BACK TO ITS BEST

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ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY
10 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW

"WE WANTED YOU TO FEEL LIKE A SUPERHERO RIGHT AWAY"
Bryan Intihar, Insomniac Games

EXCLUSIVE ACCESS

SPIDER-MAN

THE INSIDE STORY OF HOW INSOMNIAC BUILT A MODERN MARVEL

BARD'S TALE IV
Hands-on with the return of a RPG legend

RESIDENT EVIL 2
More than just a remake of a classic

ALSO INSIDE
FIFA 19 ■ FORTNITE ■ HAROLD HALIBUT
■ SKULL & BONES ■ CONTROL ■ DYING LIGHT 2
■ TRIALS RISING ■ ORI AND THE WILL OF THE WISPS
■ TWO POINT HOSPITAL ■ OCTOPATH TRAVELER ■ WARFACE

FUTURE
ISSUE 203

I was trying to think when my Spider-Man history dates back to. Possibly it started on Saturday mornings with reruns of the Sixties animated show and its famous theme tune, but I don't remember much if anything about it other than the janky visuals. Certainly I watched the early Nineties cartoon, which I remember being very good, and is probably where I get most of my understanding of the character. But it wasn't long after this, as comic book-based cartoons became vogue, that I started picking up issues on the shelves.

Alas, my timing wasn't great, as Spider-Man was in the midst of the infamous Clone Saga. Fans of the comics will know this period well, as all sorts of weird and wonderful Peter Parker wannabes kept emerging and confusing the story. It did however give us the Scarlet Spider, who remains a favourite of mine (and whose costume I dearly hope to see in Spidey's PS4 appearance). Over the years I've kept coming back to this character, whether in movies, comics or other media. Spider-Man has been a magnetic presence for me.

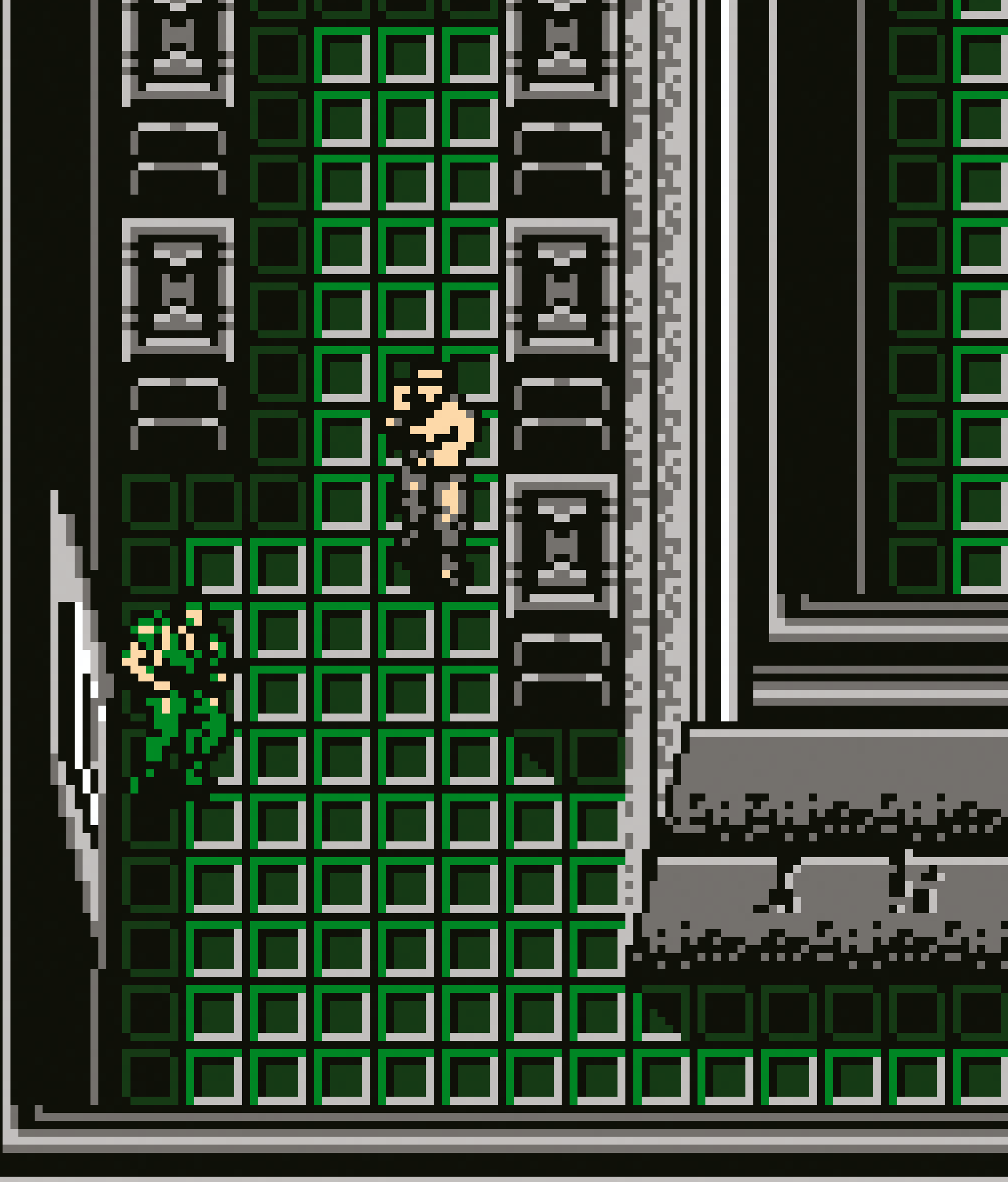
And if I were to try to explain his appeal simply, it would be that for me he is the personification of the will to be better. He has some powers and special abilities, but really, with the odds he often faces, he is completely out of his depth. Yet he keeps going, keeps trying and puts his body on the line for what he believes is right. He doesn't always believe he will succeed. Sometimes he seems convinced he will fail. But he tries anyway, because who else will? I've always found that hugely inspiring.



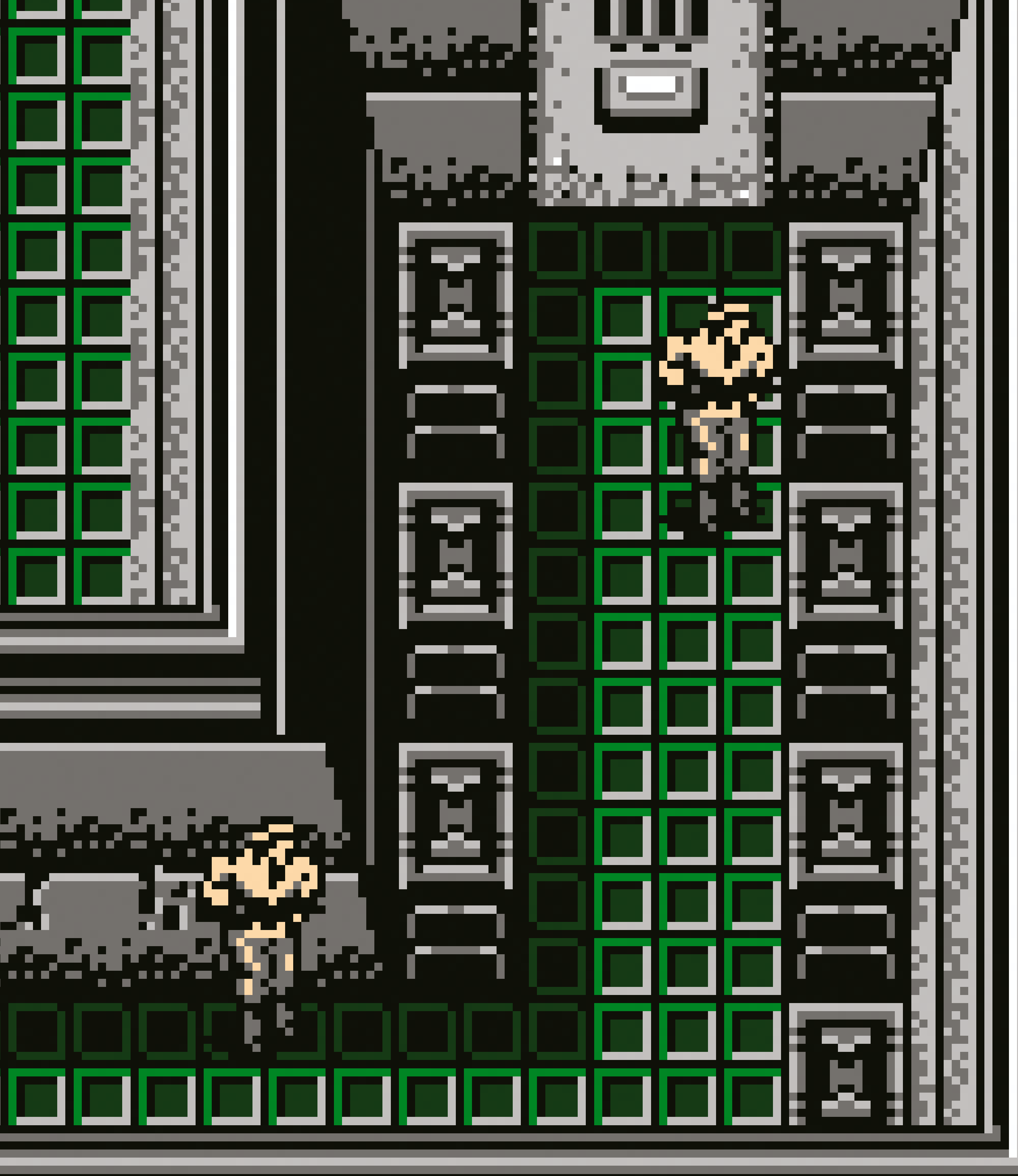
Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR

ANOTHER ISSUE OF GAMES™ WILL BE SWINGING IN FASTER THAN YOU THINK SO CHECK OUT OUR LATEST SUBSCRIPTION OFFERS ON PAGE 44



LIFE



HAND GUN 2035

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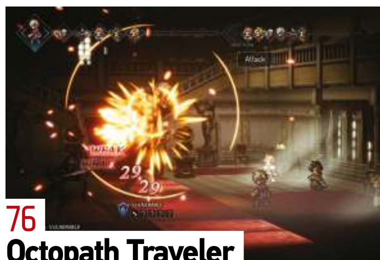


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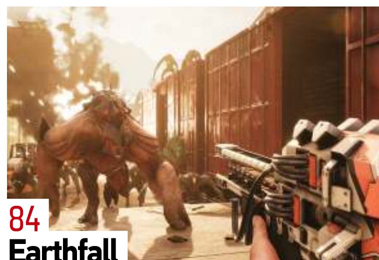
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SPIDER-MAN

Insomniac Games gives us the inside story of how it made its modern marvel masterpiece

ANTHEM IS THE SHARED-WORLD SHOOTER WE'VE BEEN WAITING FOR

→ BIOWARE IS BACK TO ITS BEST

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **EA** | DEVELOPER: **BIOWARE** | RELEASE: **22 FEB 2019** | PLAYERS: **1-4**

We try to not make a habit of judging the progression of toolsets within the videogame industry against what a special effects team is capable of in the film industry, though in this instance we are willing to make a *small* exception. It's been ten years; ten long years since *Iron Man* made its debut, introducing us to exoskeleton flight suits that moved with such fluidity and grace on screen that never once did we question their plausibility. That effect never quite made it to gaming, but we have to believe that developers and engineers were watching closely. Quietly experimenting with the mechanics and systems that would not only allow for seamless transitions between ground and aerial movement in a human-sized combat vehicle, but for it to feel comfortable and weighted underneath your fingertips too.

Regardless of whether it was an intentional aspiration for BioWare or not, *Anthem* is perhaps the first game to properly deliver on the dream. Movement is the star of *Anthem*. The suits allow for tight and tempered navigation within the sprawling open spaces the studio has engineered, and exploration is to be as key to the experience as combat; each of the Javelin suits are expressive, designed to be distinct at a distance and hugely customisable. The execution of the systems is key in bringing tactility and tactical opportunity to play – perfect for fending off the swarms of creatures that inhabit large parts of the planet we will likely call home for years to come.

> "THE SUITS ALLOW FOR TIGHT AND TEMPERED NAVIGATION WITHIN THE SPRAWLING OPEN SPACES THE STUDIO HAS ENGINEERED"

BioWare deserves great praise for what it has revealed thus far and the manner in which it has done it in. *Anthem* is a shared-world shooter with deep RPG systems, built around a customisation economy that exists to encourage rummaging through the ashes of the recently deceased. The comparisons to *Destiny* were to be expected – if not entirely inevitable in the current climate – and we can only applaud the way in which the studio has handled itself in this respect.

While it's currently impossible to speak to how well BioWare is delivering on its loftiest promise: that of bringing its proficiency in nuanced storytelling to the shared-world shooter experience – an area in which new-found rival Bungie has struggled with no end – we do have a sense of how excellently the other elements are coming together to form a cohesive whole. Alongside the exquisite movement systems and the seamless transitions between land, air and, impressively, the underwater ecosystems presented thus far, we're also beginning to get a sense of just how proficient the studio has become in realising third-person action.

Shooting had, arguably, always been the weakest part of the Mass Effect series, although the team finally seems to have a handle on it for *Anthem*. In presenting combat spaces that demand free-form tactical play and teamwork to make light work of a variety of impressively driven enemy combatants, we see this lain out clearly. Each Javelin suit comes equipped with an array of basic weaponry to complement the particular models – some wielding heavier weapons that groan into action as you squeeze the triggers, and others that handle peppier firearms that jilt and jolt as you quickly unleash shots. What we're trying to say is that the third-person shooting feels responsive and fluid – a notable step up from what we've seen from BioWare in the past.

This is particularly evident as you begin to consider the special abilities that come into play: exotic gear that can be found out in the world and looted from corpses before being slotted into empty spaces in the suit. These powerful attacks can be combined between players in a party, setting off chain combos and prompting large-scale scenes of AOE destruction. It's encouraging to see; *Anthem* is a game that feels wholeheartedly designed around cooperative play, leveraging the best elements of the shared-world shooter model with what it knows fans are desperate to see integrated.

Anthem might not be a typical BioWare experience, but you shouldn't dismiss it. Its scope is huge, the ambition is ridiculous, and from what we've seen so far it looks like it will easily fill that huge hole in your heart that has been made by the gradual decline of *Destiny 2*.

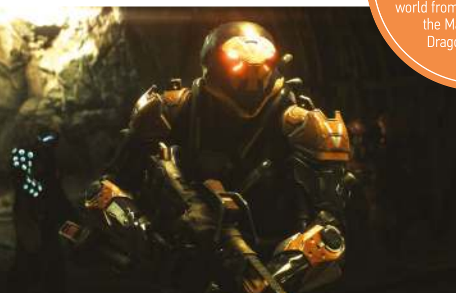


■ *Anthem* will have deep RPG systems in place to allow every player some degree of agency in this shared world experience. Don't expect any romancing though; that's out this time around.

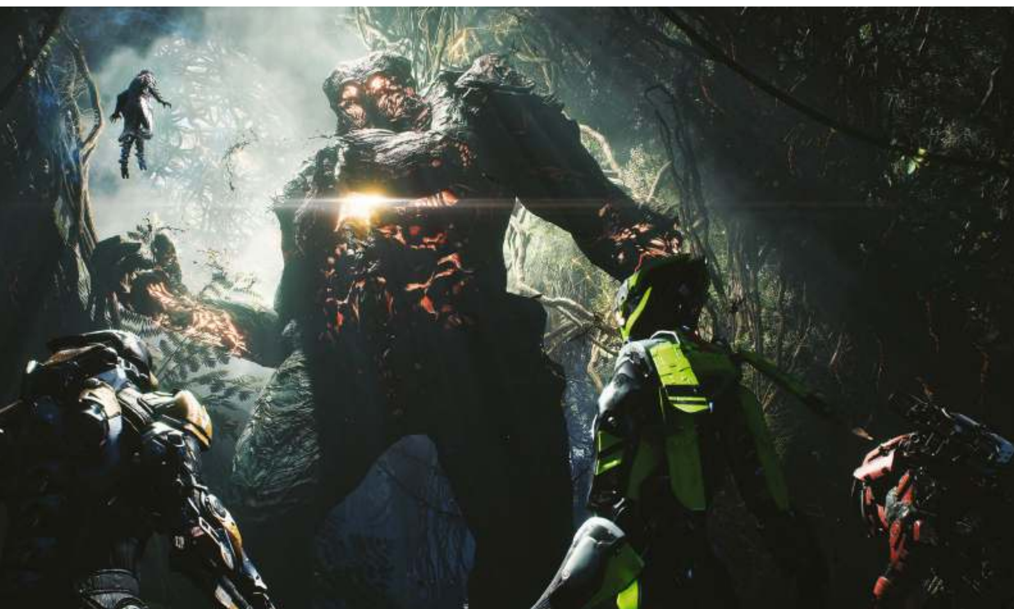
■ Above: *Anthem* is a shared-world shooter from the team behind Mass Effect and Dragon Age. Designed to be played in co-op or solo, BioWare hopes to bring its talents in the RPG space to the popular online-connected third-person shooter genre. Right: The star of *Anthem* is undoubtedly the movement. Once you step inside your fully customisable Javelin suit you'll be able to seamlessly transition between running on the ground and flying through the air with a click of the thumbstick. Right: Missions will have you teaming up with friends to explore beautiful open spaces, fighting back mysterious alien creatures and, of course, doing battle with some huge bloody monsters. Hit the weak points for maximum damage... come on, you know the drill.

IN BRIEF

A third-person shooter-RPG hybrid set in a dynamic shared world from the studio behind the Mass Effect and Dragon Age series









SOLO PLAY

While *Anthem* is indeed designed around co-op, BioWare has promised that the game can still be enjoyed as a single-player experience. That's important to the studio; its legacy is in single-player design, and it wasn't about to leave that behind. It might look like a third-person shooter, but the team behind the title is indeed still pushing to bring heavy RPG elements into play to ensure that the game will work no matter the composition of your party. We are yet to see how this works in practice, although early indications suggest that boss battles and enemy numbers may indeed scale with character level and numbers. Still, with a 2019 release date still a number of months away, there is plenty of time for BioWare to work out the details.

■ Whether rain or snow or sleet or hail, the heat of the day or the middle of the night, *Forza Horizon 4* will let you race across Britain on your own time.

IN BRIEF
Playground Games' stunning new racing game gives Mother Nature herself a starring role





MEET THE MCLAREN SENNA

→ **Forza Horizon 4's featured ride stands out in a big way**

The Forza cover car is a prestigious honour, one that the Forza team saves for the best of the best. *Forza Horizon 4* will be adorned by the McLaren Senna, and Forza fans will have a lot of fun with this one. The car, according to McLaren's press release announcing the Senna and Forza partnership, sports a "massive 789bhp [horsepower] from its mid-mounted 4.0-litre twin-turbo V8" engine. Despite that power the Senna is the lightest McLaren the company has made since "the legendary McLaren F1" and can reach speeds of "124mph in just 6.8 seconds and 186mph in 17.5 seconds." For the Forza faithful that all means one thing: a ton of fun on the open road.





FORZA HORIZON 4 TURNS TO MOTHER NATURE TO CHANGE THE GAME

→ A BRAND-NEW RACE THAT SPANS ALL FOUR SEASONS

FORMAT: **PC, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT STUDIOS** | DEVELOPER: **PLAYGROUND GAMES** | RELEASE: **2 OCTOBER 2018** | PLAYERS: **1-TBC**

Microsoft has crafted an ingenious strategy with Forza, its flagship racing franchise. Each year the focus changes from hardcore racing simulation in the core series to a more broad and free type of racing in Horizon. Where the core game sports legendary tracks and cars built for pure racing, Horizon cares more about the open road and the locales that contain them. *Forza Horizon 4* is bringing that philosophy home to Britain, including some interesting new ways to experience the thrill of the race.

The top addition to *Forza Horizon 4* is the dynamic season system, where all four seasons will rotate in and change the way each race is played. Spring and summer bring mostly sun-glistened roads and blue skies, though the occasional rainstorm will impact the races that find them. Autumn will fill the screen with colour, as leaves change and fall from trees just as they would in real life, while winter dumps snow onto the action and affects how cars handle and accelerate. Each season lasts about one real-world week before transitioning, which will give us plenty of exposure to all of the elements.

The hands-on demo we tried out gave us a small two to three minute taste of each season, and all impressed us as we sped through. Autumn breezed by fastest, as the falling leaves served as more of a backdrop than a true hazard. Winter was the exact opposite, as the piled-up snow made more of an impact on our race than we expected. Spring was filled with stunt jumps in a densely wooded area, showing off *Horizon 4*'s more extreme driving features. We clocked some serious top speeds in summertime, giving us the biggest rush of the four individual seasons.

"NOT ONLY IS THE RACING GOOD IN EACH SEASON, BUT THE ATTENTION TO DETAIL PLAYGROUND GAMES BRINGS TO THEM IS ASTOUNDING"

The demo was brief, clocking in at about 12 minutes total, but we learned two major things from playing it. First, the core driving of Forza is alive and well no matter which season we're currently playing. Each car feels slick and smooth, from the speedy McLaren Senna we helmed in autumn and summer to the 4x4 pick-up trucks with which we blazed through the winter roads. Obviously the cars had their differences, the pick-up certainly isn't going to perform as well as the McLaren, but each one felt comfortable in the environment we played them in.

Each season felt unique to the point where we at times forgot we were playing the same game. We can already envision devout Forza players challenging themselves throughout the different dynamic weather scenarios, trying to see how fast they can drive down a snowy, inviting straight without losing control or catching the most air from a big jump. There will be plenty of ways to speed through each of Britain's seasons in *Horizon 4*, which should make Forza fans incredibly excited.

Not only is the racing good in each season, but the attention to detail Playground Games brings to them is astounding. Individual ripples can be seen in rain-filled puddles along the tracks, puddles which will grow as more rain falls. Each leaf that falls in autumn is unique, creating a collage of yellows, oranges and red while we speed through a country road. We're curious if a rainstorm in autumn will create a wet-leaves hazard on the road, but that remains to be seen in-game. Meanwhile the snowbound races impressed us the most, as tyre tracks form instantly and specifically to each car, while slipping on the slick roads is a serious hazard. Driving in perfect conditions feels great of course, we fully expected that to be the case, but we may end up having more fun trying to traverse each season's special hazards in the long run.

Forza Horizon 4 will take the mantle for the Forza name this October, and so far it looks like it will do the series proud. Dynamic seasons create unique driving experiences, the British landscapes are gorgeous to behold and the driving is as fast and furious as ever. There's a lot of fantastic racing on the horizon; this demo only proved it.

■ Left: *Forza Horizon 4* offers tracks through all sorts of areas, from dense forests to open roads and even Britain's sandy beaches.
Left: Great Britain plays host to the Horizon Festival in *Forza Horizon 4*, and as such expect to see a few British staples lining the roads.
Below: The dynamic season system means the skies could open at any time, so be prepared to get down and dirty when the rain starts to fall.





HAROLD HALIBUT COMBINES STOP MOTION WITH ADVENTURE

→ CHIEF DESIGNER ONAT HEKIMOGLU AND ART DIRECTOR OLE TILLMANN TALK INSPIRATIONS AND ACHIEVING A HANDMADE AESTHETIC

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE, PC** | PUBLISHER: **CURVE DIGITAL** | DEVELOPER: **SLOW BROS** | RELEASE: **Q3 2019** | PLAYERS: **TBC**

The word 'handcrafted' is somewhat of a misnomer in gaming. If we are to take its literal meaning – the act of an object physically being created by hand without machine – it's a word that instantly conjures up tantalising artisanal food, intricate wooden furniture or perhaps delicately embroidered textiles. For quirky adventure *Harold Halibut*, we might be getting the closest we possibly can to a handcrafted videogame.

Made out of wood, metal and clay, as well as via a variety of 3D scanning techniques and Unity, indie German developers Slow Bros sought to create a weird and wonderful cinematic stop-motion game, featuring real built sets and puppet characters. In *Harold Halibut*, you play a janitor trying to help relaunch a spaceship stuck on a water planet, all while unearthing secrets.


ONAT HEKIMOGLU
SLOW BROS


OLE TILLMANN
SLOW BROS



Above: Slow Bros was founded three years ago, but *Harold Halibut* has been in development for eight years

In some ways, *Harold Halibut* evokes the eccentricity of Wes Anderson meshed with the nautical claustrophobia of *BioShock*. Though a lot of comparisons point to his stop-motion tales *Isle Of Dogs* and *Fantastic Mr Fox*, the inspiration is actually more diverse and comes from further afield, including obscure retrofuturistic Fifties/Sixties architecture. The idea itself, though, stemmed from similar childhood interests that the core founding team were reminiscing over. "The stop-motion element came naturally from all the stuff we looked at as kids, and continued to look at in film school," says art director Ole Tillmann.

"We actually like that whole underwater theme in general, and also science fiction, so we were like, 'should we make a game that is underwater or in space?', but then we thought, 'why don't we just combine those?'," says chief game designer and writer Onat Hekimoglu. "Also, being in an enclosed space was one of the main ideas… we liked the idea of not having any external influences in the life inside of the spaceship; it should be a size that is big enough so that things can evolve in there on its own, but in the meantime you won't have all the external influences that you'd have in our world."

"There are so many mixed-up influences, especially because the team doesn't *only* consist of people with game backgrounds," adds Tillmann. In fact, over half the team have backgrounds in other areas outside of the traditional gaming roles; there is a carpenter and a fashion designer to complement the sound designer and character artist, and both Tillmann and Hekimoglu went to film school. The variety in responsibilities and types of people in the team have brought in "a lot of new ideas" and made *Harold Halibut*'s aesthetic even more individualistic.

And while the idea of mixing digital and analogue was set early on, it wasn't until Tillmann came on board that the concoction really came into its own and the team learned how to work with the two mediums. Much of the process has been a result of trial and error, which both Tillmann and Hekimoglu say has actually been the most enjoyable part of creating *Harold Halibut* so far. "It has been a long time and there's been so much experimentation involved. I think at this point already, it's really satisfying to see the sometimes strange but beautiful combination of the digital and analogue because I could have never imagined that would be the outcome, ultimately," says Tillmann.

"Even when Ole came on we started very traditionally, actually. We did sprite-based animation, we tried out real stop-motion animation and 2D backgrounds with sprite-based characters," reveals Hekimoglu. "After a while there was a long time of experimenting to get a feel of how it could work. When we had our first 2D prototype it felt like a Nineties click-and-type adventure, and it was very static. It just didn't feel right for the time we lived in." Instead, the team opted to find a more modern solution. "That was one huge part before we actually founded the company – to find out how we can bring this to our current time, and so we came up with adding 3D scanning, modelling and so on," he says.

Once a set or puppet has been built, it is scanned, tidied up and taken in engine into Unity. Slow Bros deliberately avoided trying to conquer the uncanny valley and the problems of making digital human skin with their characters. Instead, it opted for a stop-motion look in *Harold Halibut*, which meant that players would immediately recognise the puppetry and be absorbed by the handmade charm, "You see the puppets and you think it's stop motion and the rest is some kind of magic that happens in the brain that fools you," Hekimoglu adds.

Thanks to the physically built set and characters, many of the natural real-life imperfections on the models helped to speed things along, "It makes things easier actually, because there is this handmade part that you immediately see: the brushstrokes and all these little mistakes you create during the physical creation process," says Hekimoglu. "Up to this part it's real, so that's at least one part that already looks great." The entire process for each asset is taking just over two weeks now. "That's on average though because as soon as someone has a fancier hairdo, it takes an extra weekend!" laughs Tillmann. Thankfully all that effort is paying dividends.





■ Most of the animation in *Harold Halibut* was actually motion captured.





■ It takes a week to physically build the characters, and a week to digitally integrate them.

IN BRIEF

Harold Halibut is a handmade stop-motion-style subterranean adventure game, combining the worlds of digital and analogue





REMEDY TAKES BACK CONTROL

→ NOTHING IS AT IT SEEMS IN THE OLDEST HOUSE

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **505 GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **REMEDY ENTERTAINMENT** | RELEASE: **TBC 2019** | PLAYERS: **1**

It's a new game from Remedy Entertainment. It's weird, okay. It's *super weird*. Not that we've necessarily come to expect anything less from the studio that has delivered *Max Payne*, *Alan Wake* and *Quantum Break* to us over the last two decades, but *Control* honestly caught us a little off-guard.

The game is based around the idea of investigating the headquarters of a federal agency responsible for monitoring the unexplained. The world is subversive and steeped in the unnatural, presenting level and scenario design from an ever-shifting perspective. *Control* is non-linear by its very nature, meaning the only way to progress is to dig into the threads of story that you stumble across and follow them the best you can. Navigating the spaces of The Oldest House – that's the aforementioned HQ – is no easy task, particularly as the environments adhere to nought but a dreamlike logic – its twisting corridors infested by supernatural entities. It's difficult to know how Remedy will handle the construction of such a free-form experience, though we're confident that it will still deliver in all the ways that we've come to expect from the studio: an intriguing story and high-octane action based within a world with a weird streak running down its spine. Basically, an experience that no other developer in this industry would dare attempt.

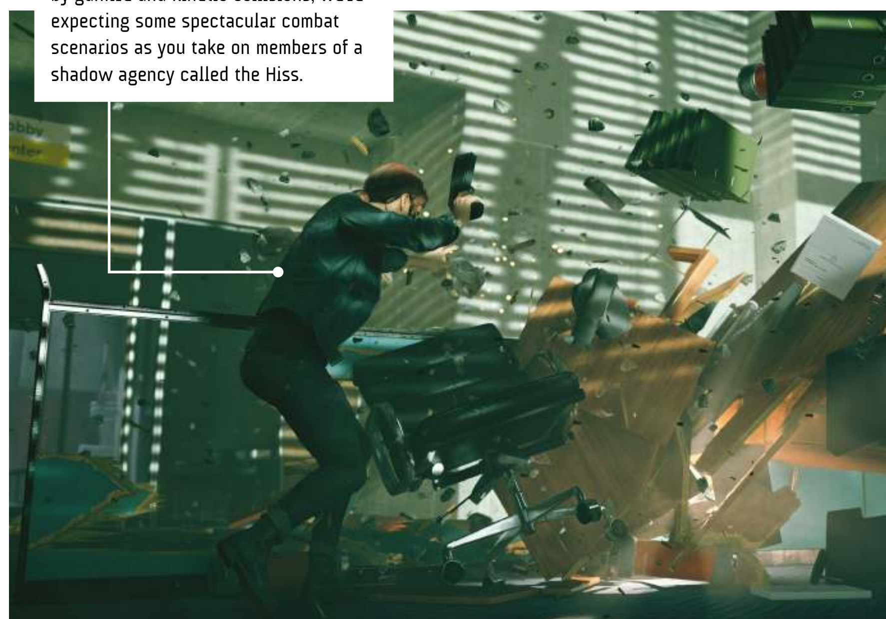


THE OLDEST HOUSE

Control is the most non-linear game Remedy has ever created. All of it takes place within The Oldest House, the headquarters for the Federal Bureau Of Control. It's effectively an entire world within one location, with the space adhering to surrealist logic as it shifts and contorts around you. The world opens up the deeper in you crawl, expanding as you earn new abilities and come to understand the rituals that control the landscape.

BUILDING FROM THE PAST

Remedy has a lot of experience with action shooters. *Control* is taking the supernatural powers introduced in *Quantum Break* and is blending it with the stylish combat of *Max Payne*, and the results are certainly impressive. Given that the environments can, effectively, be procedurally ripped apart by gunfire and kinetic collisions, we're expecting some spectacular combat scenarios as you take on members of a shadow agency called the Hiss.



"CONTROL IS TAKING THE SUPERNATURAL POWERS INTRODUCED IN QUANTUM BREAK AND IS BLENDING IT WITH THE STYLISH COMBAT OF MAX PAYNE"

SUPERNATURAL POWERS

As you progress through *Control* you'll find that you eventually earn new abilities and upgrades for your Service Weapon. The abilities include paranormal powers, such as the capacity to levitate or launch objects with force at enemies, while the weapon itself can shift into different forms. We only know of two as of writing, with the gun jumping between precision (handgun configuration) and damage (shotgun) as you see fit.

IN BRIEF

Control is a third-person action-adventure game from *Remedy*, the studio behind *Max Payne* and *Alan Wake*





DYING LIGHT 2 LETS YOU DEFINE THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY

→ NOBODY SAID SURVIVING WOULD EVER BE EASY

IN BRIEF
The sequel to the hugely successful *Dying Light*, taking players to a brand new city with a fresh new threat to contend with

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **TECHLAND PUBLISHING** | DEVELOPER: **TECHLAND** | RELEASE: **TBC 2019** | PLAYERS: **TBC**



HUMANITY LIVES TO DESTROY

1 *Dying Light 2* pulls the action away from the idyllic vistas of Harran and into an apocalyptic vision of the Modern Dark Ages. Here, the undead aren't the only threat you have to contend with – after years of strife, what remains of humanity is desperate to survive and rebuild itself, no matter the cost. In *Dying Light 2* we'll be forced to contend with a mutating zombie threat and warring factions seeking control over the future of humanity.



A BRAVE NEW WORLD

2 Techland is overhauling its acclaimed parkour movement systems and it wanted to create a landscape to better take advantage of that work. The result is a city far more vertical and diverse, giving us plenty of opportunity to quickly (and stylishly) navigate the space as we please. Honestly, as if there were any lingering doubts, Techland has overtaken DICE as the masters of the fluid open-world movement paradigm.



THE WORLD REACTS TO YOUR DECISIONS

3 Choice and decision lie at the heart of *Dying Light 2*, with both the world design and the story reacting to your actions in clear and obvious ways. Too often studios promise this level of interactivity with the composition of a place and its populous, but fail to deliver. Techland has brought in legendary scribe Chris Avellone to help shape this twisting narrative vision and we're impressed by what we've seen thus far.



FORGE A UNIQUE PATH

4 Given the incredible level of interactivity that players will be given with the story and this world, it really puts us in a somewhat unique position to carve out our own path. *Dying Light 2* has returned to the playing field with a whole new host of abilities and customisable weapons, meaning that you'll be able to really dial in what sort of character you want to play in this mercurial, ever-shifting vision of the post-apocalypse.

INSIDE THE V&A'S VIDEOGAME EXHIBITION

→ THE VICTORIA & ALBERT MUSEUM IS ABOUT TO KICK OFF A CELEBRATION OF MODERN GAMING

OPEN: **8 SEPTEMBER 2018 – 24 FEBRUARY 2019** | LOCATION: **V&A MUSEUM, CROMWELL ROAD, LONDON, SW7 2RL**



Above: As well as creating within games, the creativity and community around gaming is explored by this exhibit with some space dedicated to cosplay and the wonderful artistry that exists in that offshoot of gaming fandom.

Starting in September at the Victoria & Albert Museum you're going to be able to visit and experience a celebration of videogame design and culture unlike anything we've seen before. The V&A prides itself on being the leading museum of art and design, spanning works of architecture, fashion, photography, sculpture, jewellery and much more. Given the multifaceted array of objects and exhibits that the museum boasts, it feels like the perfect place to honour and mark the current state of the games industry; a place where design, art, building, coding, creating and moulding all merge together to form a single, final consumer experience.

"Normally we expect the question of, 'Why here?' and when you look at it, it's a really perfect fit," agrees Marie Foulston, curator of videogames at the V&A and 'queen roughhouser' at Wild Rumpus. "My background in games is that I've worked across a number of institutions, but my experience curatorially is that I co-founded the collective Wild Rumpus, which is a UK-based independent games collective who have thrown various events."

Meanwhile, Foulston's colleague Kristian Volsing comes from the museum side of the experience, albeit also as an avid gamer. "I've always played games and in my career I've been trying to bring an understanding of popular culture to museums and exploring that in that space," the research curator tells us. "Of course, videogames are one of the most important mediums of our time and as someone who has always played games I've been excited about the prospect of being able to investigate that in a cultural space."

And through the V&A's experience showcasing works of art and creativity that are perhaps not easily contained in a single space, displaying games makes a lot of sense. "Architecture has been really great to look towards and we can see the parallels between the nature of the objects and the materials that we collect," Foulston explains. "The other one is performance: that games are like a performance that only exists when somebody is there performing it. And, equally, the way that they collect and look at the costumes and at the other materials that exist around it like the documentation and looking even beyond the performance, looking at the response and the cultural engagement with those works."

So, it's with all of this in mind that the V&A has put together an exhibition entitled Design/Play/Disrupt that walks you through the design process, the creativity of being a player and the new forms of disruptive game design that exist. It will cover titles from triple-A releases like *Splatoon* and *The Last Of Us*, to indie oddities like *How Do You Do It?* and *Kentucky Route Zero* as well as how players come to their own creativity through games, both in-game in something like *Minecraft*, and personally with something like cosplay.

"For the way that we're approaching the subject it's very much a focus on design and how we explore design, so we need to be showing more than the game to open that up to people," Foulston reveals. "We need to find objects from the design process that show a different angle. We need to create these special installations that provide people with a perspective that they can't get from being at home and playing."

A great example of this that we got to see was an early test video from *Journey* from thatgamecompany that simply had two dots moving around a maze that got quicker the closer they were to each other. It was the studio's primer for the co-operative effects of meeting strangers in its open-world exploration experience. In this way the exhibition will pull back the curtain on the design process, but also reveal the human element behind the creativity.

"WE ABSOLUTELY WANTED TO SHOW THE BROAD RANGE OF PEOPLE WHO ARE MAKING GAMES, FROM SOMEBODY MAKING THEM IN THEIR BEDROOM THROUGH TO GIANT STUDIOS WITH 300 PEOPLE"

"We absolutely wanted to show the broad range of people who are making games, from somebody making them in their bedroom through to giant studios with 300 people," says Volsing. "And to try to have a global perspective as well. I think that comes out more in certain spaces, like the disrupt space, talking about the geopolitical angles and stuff like that."

And then there's the commonality between experiences that the team has found, that game makers and other creators are not so uncommon in approach even if their tools are different, "One of the things that I think is really great is that every single designer that we spoke to across the whole of the exhibition, whether it was a cosplay designer or a games designer or someone making YouTube videos, the thing that comes back from everyone is that everyone still has a notebook," Foulston tells us. "Everybody still has that fundamental tool that sits across all design that no matter what field of design you work within you understand it starts with you writing some ideas down or sketching things out."

It's looking like an amazing new take on videogames, breaking out from the typical retro-gaming retrospectives and checking in with where we are now. We'll certainly be checking it out starting 8 September and we hope you will too.





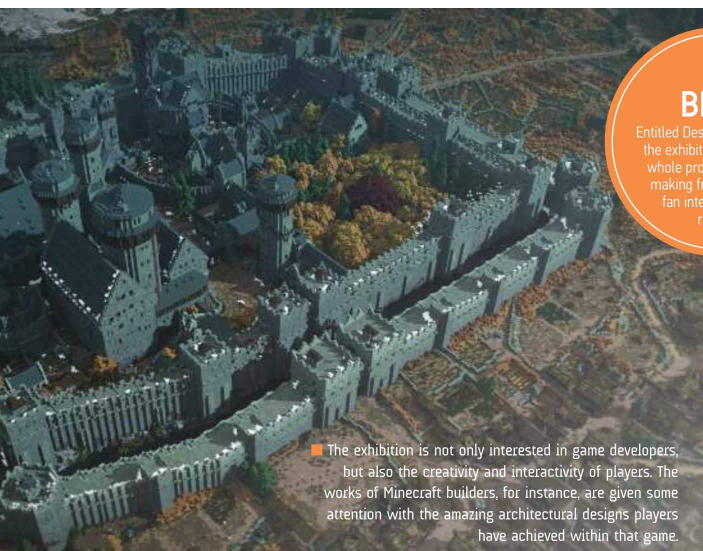


The Arcade Backpack from UCLA Games Lab is just one of the DIY arcade installations that will be featured as part of the Play portion of the showcase, giving you an interactive experience on top of the behind the scenes material.







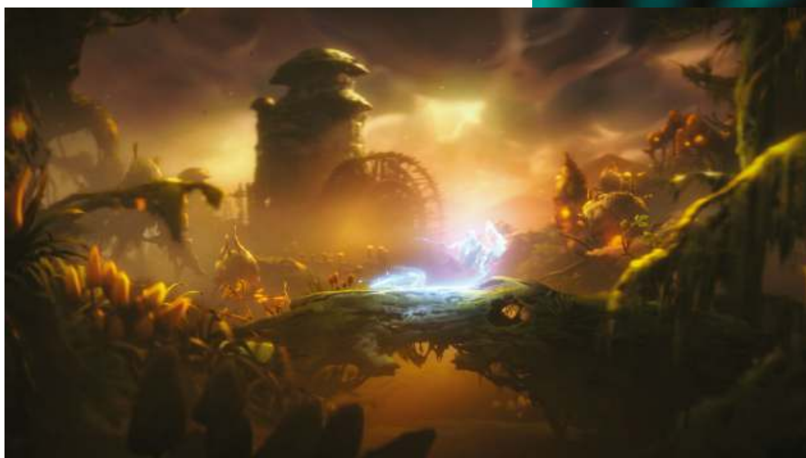


The exhibition is not only interested in game developers, but also the creativity and interactivity of players. The works of Minecraft builders, for instance, are given some attention with the amazing architectural designs players have achieved within that game.

IN BRIEF

Entitled Design/Play/Disrupt the exhibition looks at the whole process of game-making from concept to fan interaction post release





"THERE'S A LOT TO TAKE IN WITH THIS NEW ORI GAME, WHICH IS PARTICULARLY IMPRESSIVE CONSIDERING HOW SHORT THE DEMO FELT AS WE BREEZED THROUGH IT"

ORI RETURNS AND IT'S UP FOR THE FIGHT

→ NEW WEAPONS AND COMBAT BRING INNOVATION TO WILL OF THE WISPS

FORMAT: **XBOX ONE, PC** | PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **MOON STUDIOS** | RELEASE: **TBC 2019** | PLAYERS: **1**

After his emotional and charming debut in 2015, Ori is returning to our consoles in *Ori And The Will Of The Wisps*. While the robust platforming mechanics return, Ori is also bringing with him new mechanics, abilities and friends. There's a lot to take in with this new Ori game, which is particularly impressive considering how short the demo felt as we breezed through it.

The biggest change is Ori's combat prowess, as he can now use a selection of new weapons. The Spirit Edge is an energy sword used for quick melee attacks and combos, while the Spirit Arc shoots arrows at enemies to keep distance. These weapons and other items will be found via new non-playable characters that assign Ori side quests. Completing these optional tasks will require Ori's smooth platforming techniques, including older powers like his double jump and the new Burrow ability where he drills through soft ground.

We don't know when we'll be able to return to the world of Ori, but based on what we've seen already this will be another classic adventure for our small hero. His new abilities coupled with the original's platforming will make this a game to watch keenly in 2019.

IN BRIEF

Attempt to escape a smart yet fashion-forward spaceship, while evading/taking down clones that adapt to your actions and tactics

A LUSH WORLD BRIMMING WITH LIFE

Ori And The Blind Forest's tremendous art style carries over beautifully to this new game, with rich and detailed regions showcasing all sorts of different elements. The frozen Ice Forest, the sandy deserts of the Windswept Wastes and the owl graveyard from the first trailer are just some of the areas Ori will traverse on his quest, which is said to be much longer than the first game.

A NEWLY POWERFUL HERO

Ori retains his diminutive stature, but within that small frame is a powerhouse. His new combat moves give him plenty of options against enemies, while his slick and fluid movement through the world is simply breathtaking. If the challenge of the first game returns in *Will Of The Wisps*, Ori will need every special power he can get his hands on if he's going to make it through unscathed.





NEW HELPERS ON THE QUEST

Ori's adventure will be buffered by a few new faces found along the path, some that will task him with side quests, while others act as merchants. Lupo is the proprietor of Lupo's Map Emporium, and will sell Ori a map of the region he's in, a blue bird called Tokki needs Ori's help finding a missing item in the sand, and more are sure to be revealed in time.

IN BRIEF

Fortnite: Battle Royale is basically the biggest game in the world. If you don't know what it is by now we… we have a lot to catch you up on









FORTNITE OFFERS A GLIMPSE INTO THE FUTURE OF LIVE-SERVICE STORYTELLING

→ EPIC GAMES HAS FORGED ONE OF THE MOST INTERESTING AND ARRESTING NARRATIVES WE'VE SEEN IN THE INDUSTRY IN YEARS. LET'S TALK ABOUT WHY THAT IS

FORMAT: **ANDROID, IOS, PC, PS4, SWITCH, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **EPIC GAMES** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **EARLY ACCESS** | PLAYERS: **1-100**

The battle royale has proven itself to be one of the strongest vehicles for emergent storytelling that this industry has ever seen. Even in its relative infancy, the genre found immediate success in letting players forge and share their own stories in the face of shifting combat parameters; feats of heroism and tales laced with tragedy cast out across a canvas that gladly resets itself between rounds. It's these emergent moments that have helped keep the likes of *Fortnite: Battle Royale* and *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* within the sphere of public interest for so long. But developer Epic Games knew that the battle royale bubble could burst at any time; that the games within it could only stay relevant if players felt as if they were invested in more than mere action alone. The players had to invest in the game beyond a desire to win or unlock new items through a laundry list of challenges.

Fortnite has shifted to meet this challenge head on. It has made players care about a story outside of their own actions; quietly investing them in the intersection between a shifting narrative and the evolution of the core gameplay. What's truly intriguing to see is how Epic has continued to iterate and build upon this idea of over the past eight months. *Battle Royale* now features one of the most ingenious game narratives that we have seen executed in years, leveraging the game's lack of traditional arc, named characters or entrenched lore to tell an ever-evolving story that casts the map as the central character in a story that feels as wildly unpredictable as it does transformative.

As any consumer of MMO worlds will attest to, live-service storytelling is certainly nothing new in this industry. The wave of shared-world shooters that arrived at the turn of the generation have too been toying with this concept, delivering mixed results, while BioWare has practically enshrined it as a tentpole for quest and mission design in 2019's *Anthem*. So why celebrate *Fortnite* for something that the industry has been experimenting with for over a decade, let alone something that is at the forefront of the thinking of some of the biggest triple-A studios in the world?

> "FORTNITE: BATTLE ROYALE NOW FEATURES ONE OF THE MOST INGENIOUS GAME NARRATIVES THAT WE HAVE SEEN EXECUTED IN YEARS"

Perhaps it's because we're seeing live-service storytelling implemented in a game that resets itself every 20 minutes. That in and of itself feels fresh and exciting. Epic has crafted a narrative through little more than subtle environmental storytelling, contextual hints and in-game markers, and it has done so without diluting or distracting from the core allure of the game – it's still fundamentally focused around the idea of leaving 100 players on a deserted island to shoot, loot and build their way to hard-earned victory. The core balance of play remains uncontested, and Epic has simply constructed something around all of this that the players can become invested in should they so desire to.

Fortnite is finding so much success because it has been able to take something as rudimentary as a map update and turn it into a huge world event. The map is persistent, even if your progress through it isn't. It can now change instantaneously for tens of millions of players around the world – creating 'blink or you'll miss it' moments that light up the Internet and keep millions glued to the screen for every tease and every development as it emerges slowly over a season of content.

The result is a game that feels richer and deeper than any of its competitors, if not any other live-service game currently on the market. In pushing a constantly updating narrative alongside a robust and expressive avatar upgrade system – not to mention a monetisation system that offers little more than cosmetic updates – Epic has created an environment that feels welcoming to players new and old, the game balance as strong as it was the day *Battle Royale* launched, but the world far more expressive than we could ever have imagined it would be.

Where Destiny and its kin has struggled to pin its plots around barely visible alien threats, while *World Of Warcraft* trudges ahead under the weight of its 14-year old plot, and while *Overwatch* continues to build out back story while failing to pull focus onto its present-day timeline, *Fortnite* has gleefully made the map the centre of its story and had one hell of a lot of fun with it. Between the comets threatening to wipe out areas of the maps, the sky ripping itself apart at the seams and items mysteriously vanishing out of the game world only to reappear in our own, this is storytelling that celebrates the chaos and ingenuity of videogames in a way we've seen only teased by other developers in the past.

We have no idea where Epic will take *Battle Royale* next, and that's what makes it so damned exciting. We have a feeling that whatever should happen in the next season of content, it will be yet another glimpse into the future of narrative design, world building and storytelling in the games industry.

Above: *Fortnite: Battle Royale* is still technically in early access, although Epic Games is planning to release it officially alongside *Save The World* later this year. And, yes, it will still be a free-to-play title. Left: *Battle Royale* has not only captured the attention of the world; it has also introduced some of the most entertaining live-service storytelling we have ever seen. The map has become a starring character, with Epic turning updates to its composition into huge events.



EVERYTHING THAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY



→ TEN DETAILS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT UBISOFT QUEBEC'S UNEXPECTED ADVENTURE

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT** | DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT QUEBEC** | RELEASE: **5 OCT 2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

IT'S SET IN GREECE

1 *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* is set in 431 BC, which, if you aren't a history buff, means that we are landing squarely in ancient Greece territory. Now that's long before the order of assassins was even established, which means that, yes, somewhat confusingly *Odyssey* will indeed be a prequel to last year's *Assassin's Creed Origins*.

CHOOSE YOUR ASSASSIN

2 For the first time in Assassin's Creed history, Ubisoft is giving us the opportunity to decide who we want to play through the entirety of the game as. You'll be able to choose between Kassandra and Alexios; the system is similar to that of Mass Effect, giving you the freedom to play the assassin that you feel more comfortable hanging out with for 30-plus hours.

SUBTLE SHIFT IN PLAY

3 While Kassandra and Alexios will walk through the same story and play exactly the same, Ubisoft has promised that certain characters you meet along the way will interact with each assassin in subtly different ways. Basically, this is all about celebrating consumer choice and, like any good RPG, about giving you a stronger connection with the lead character.

IT'S A FULL RPG

4 While *Origins* may have introduced a variety of RPG elements to the Assassin's Creed series, *Odyssey* is leaning into this more heavily. Not only has combat been further refined, relying on skill more so than ever before, but you'll also have the opportunity to shape the story and character as branching-dialogue trees, romance options and a suite of new abilities are all introduced into play.

THIS IS A GREEK TRAGEDY

5 Set some 400 years before *Origins*, Ubisoft Quebec wanted something suitably epic, turning Greece into an open-world playground. Regardless of whether you pick Kassandra or Alexios, you'll be the descendant of the mighty Leonidas who gets cast out of the Spartan order after defying a prophecy of the Delphi oracle. The story picks up 17 years after you get kicked out of the army.





IN BRIEF
The 11th main instalment to the Assassin's Creed series, this time taking us back to Ancient Greece









PICK YOUR SIDE IN CONFLICT

6 As a mercenary, you'll often find yourself caught up in a larger conflict outside the usual slew of side quests and busywork. *Odyssey* is set around the Peloponnesian War, a bloody battle that raged between the Athenians and the Spartans. We've been told that you'll be able to choose a side in this conflict, helping either of the armies to regain territory and take control of Greece.

THE CONFLICT IS HUGE

7 We've never seen battles of this scale in Assassin's Creed before, and it looks damned impressive. These are best demonstrated in the Conquest Battles, huge fights between the two armies that will see you attempting to cut through a screen full of enemies, all while multiple boss-strength NPCs roam the battleground looking to cut you down. Incredible to see in action.

NAVAL COMBAT RETURNS

8 Ship-to-ship combat is returning in a big way in *Odyssey*. You'll have your own vessel to control and customise – changing aesthetical components, recruiting new crew members and upgrading the ship's combat capabilities throughout the game. While the vessels handle similarly to those seen in *Black Flag* and *Rogue*, they have received a noted tune-up under the hood.

PRESENT DAY REMAINS

9 The studio isn't, unsurprisingly, saying all that much about the most divisive portion of the Assassin's Creed formula – that of the present-day sections of play. We do know that Layla Hassan will be making a return, continuing her story on from where *Origins* left off, likely picking straight up with her journey to Alexandria with William Miles.

ASSASSIN'S CREED ISN'T ANNUAL

10 Don't worry, Assassin's Creed isn't returning to its annualised release schedule. Yes, *we know* that *Origins* only released last October, but there's good reason for this game arriving so soon after. The Quebec studio went into full production on *Odyssey* after it wrapped on 2015's *Syndicate*, meaning this has already been in development for close to three years.



TRIALS RISING HAS A PLAN TO RUIN YOUR FRIENDSHIPS



→ CO-OP GAMING MAY HAVE JUST FOUND ITS MOST DEVIOUSLY FUN PRACTITIONER

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, SWITCH, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT** | DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT REDLYNX** | RELEASE: **FEB 2019** | PLAYERS: **1-8**

One of Ubisoft's surprise hits of this year's E3 line-up, *Trials Rising* brings all of the insanity of previous Trials games back to the forefront in a big way. Massive courses set in exotic locations are loaded with obstacles, with ample opportunity to maim the poor sap behind the wheel. Multiplayer races both online and off will give players plenty of ways to play, meaning countless hours of insane and silly BMX action.

Ubisoft is positioning *Trials Rising* to be a return trip to the core gameplay of Trials, what made the franchise the fan favourite it is today, and at first glance it's succeeded. Gimmicks and fluff from previous games have been removed, leaving only the fundamental Trials experience with crazy stunts and even crazier fails. The game does feel like an old Trials game, but with enough modern twists that it can feel fresh while standing on its own. Online leaderboards are returning as well, both with friends and globally, giving everyone who sits on a motorcycle something to play for.

IN BRIEF
The manic and wacky Trials franchise is back with more insane tracks and brutal crashes

The most interesting and ludicrous addition to *Trials Rising* is the local-multiplayer Tandem Bike mode, where two players assume control of one bike. Each rider is given equal sway over the bike, meaning the two players will have to really come together in order to win. It's hard enough for one person to fully control those bikes as they zoom through the track, adding a second person to the mix is a recipe for disaster, and we're all about it.

The ability to customise riders and their bikes with clothes and other items earned by playing the game is a plus, and those creations can then be uploaded to a community creations hub and voted on by other players. If enough players look at your design and think 'yeah, this could work for me', you could earn rewards like exclusive gear and extra experience.

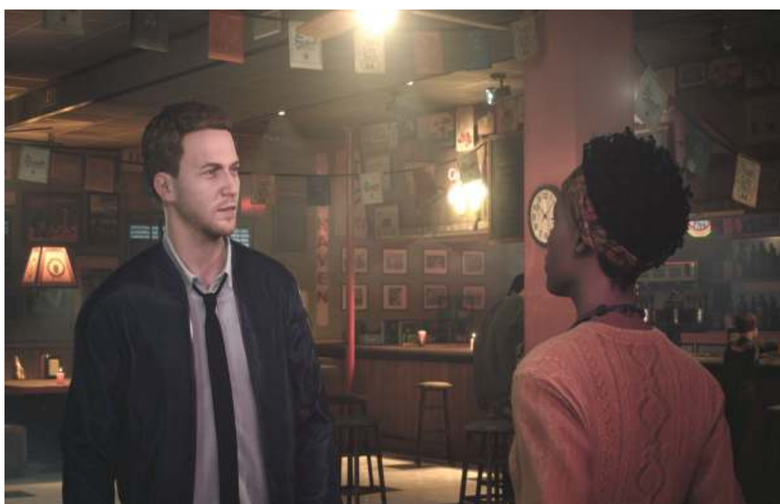
Trials Rising made a lot of folks happy when it burst onto the scene, and with a few more months until February there's plenty of time to make this the quintessential Trials game.

Above: One minute you're speeding down a hill, the next you're about to be made part of a rock concert. Such is life in the world of *Trials Rising*.

Below: *Trials Rising* is a global affair with stages spanning all over the world, from the mountain peaks of China to the pyramids of Egypt.







A NIGHT TO REMEMBER IN TWIN MIRROR

DONTNOD'S LATEST HAS CAUGHT OUR ATTENTION

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **BANDAI NAMCO**
DEVELOPER: **DONTNOD ENTERTAINMENT** | RELEASE: **2019** | PLAYERS: **1**

"What happened last night?" Many a good adventure has used those four simple words as a catalyst, though none quite as bleak as this we'd wager. Dontnod Entertainment is back, this time with a supernatural thriller as we touchdown in the town of Basswood, USA. Fans of *Twin Peaks* and *Alan Wake* will immediately gravitate to the small-town vibe being cultivated here; mysterious goings on have a tendency to rear their head in places hidden away from the attention of the wider world, and it's exactly that we will be exploring here in *Twin Mirror*.

Dontnod is renowned for its storytelling prowess, and this time it'll be lending its talents to what amounts to a murder mystery of sorts. Protagonist Sam wakes up with a heavy head – it's either a hangover induced by drinking or grief, possibly both! – and a shirt soaked in blood. The victim's whereabouts are unknown. From there our journey begins, exploring the town, the citizens that inhabit it and the freaky mirror world that seems to be seeping into Sam's reality.

IN BRIEF
Dontnod takes on small-town America mystery stories in this upcoming supernatural thriller

Knowing Dontnod, expect a heavy emphasis on investigation and branching narrative threads with the occasional pause for action. It's an interesting mix of influences; we can see but a taste of *Fahrenheit* meets *Life Is Strange* in there, a hint of *Alan Wake* and *Remember Me*. Dontnod is certainly pushing the boundaries of what we thought it was capable of in recent years, and we can't wait to see it turn its attention to a more focused adventure game after the release of *Vampyr*.







IS SABLE THE PRETTIEST GAME OF 2019?

THE ANSWER IS YES. YES IT IS.

What is *Sable*?
Sable is best described by developer Shedworks as a "coming-of-age tale of discovery through exploration across a strikingly rendered open-world desert". We say best described because every time we lay our eyes on it we fall into a temporary state of catatonic euphoria.

I mean, it does look lovely…
Doesn't it just! *Sable* is going to have us exploring ancient architecture and ruined monuments sacrificed by the cosmos. Playing as Sable, we will discover her connection and place in this world, likely solving a few environmental puzzles for progress along the way too.

What's it inspired by?
We think *Journey* would be an obvious touchstone here, not to mention *Ico* and *Shadow Of The Colossus*. From an art, colouring and shading perspective, the work of legendary French cartoonist Jean 'Moebius' Giraud is clear for all to see. Although a more contemporary example could indeed be *Prophet* artist Giannis Milonogiannis

Is there any other info?
The studio has shown off a few variants of its awesome-looking hoverbikes, so perhaps we will see some amount of customisation appear in the game. Other than that the studio has been eager to keep its mouth shut. It's clear that this is a story-driven, emotional adventure, and it doesn't want to give too much away too soon.

When will I see more?
Sable doesn't yet have a release date, although the studio did recently pick up a publisher in Raw Fury. It has placed a late-2019 label on the game, though this could shift if the team needs more time to complete its vision. We have a feeling it'll be worth the wait. 







■ *Resident Evil 2* is being built using the proprietary RE engine, which made its debut with *Resident Evil VII* last January. It looks absolutely stunning, making us fear that we might not be able to stand up to the game's horrors all over again.

IT'S TIME TO VIEW RESIDENT EVIL 2 WITH FRESH EYES

→ IT'S A REMAKE IN NAME ALONE

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **TBC 2019** | PLAYERS: **1**

Reflecting on the past often has a habit of eliciting a mixed emotional response. The familiar pang of nostalgia drives recollection, leaving you at the mercy of something so utterly impossible to control that it can be difficult to know where you stand with formative memories of the past. The good times come flooding back with the bad, gradually at first, as if a gentle wave were lapping a shore, then more frantically, a hazardous retreat into what has already been written. Nostalgia is often indistinct and untameable.

And yet so often do we find ourselves at its mercy. Is it this that has helped enshrine the return of *Resident Evil 2* as a point of conflict in our hearts and minds? We're overjoyed that a legitimate classic is being presented to a new audience in an aesthetic form it will appreciate, while still disappointed that Capcom isn't channelling its budget, bandwidth and expertise into bringing about an entirely new experience. What we're trying to say is that approaching this remake with a clear head is easier said than done – though it's in your best interest to do so.

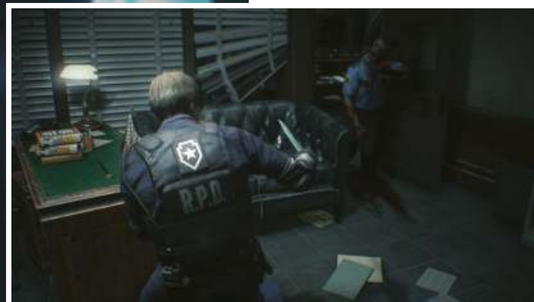
As too is retreating from the series' long and storied history – forgetting all that has transpired across the two decades of subsequent franchise mutation – in an effort to fully appreciate what Capcom is in the process of achieving here. It's important for us all to do so, mind; *Resident Evil 2* deserves to be viewed free of expectation and condemnation born from the past. It deserves to be viewed anew rather than as a relic of the past worth saving or celebrating.

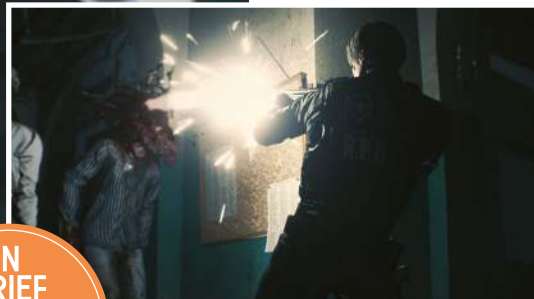
The reason behind our thinking here is that *Resident Evil 2* feels like a landmark moment, a return to form for a genre that has long grappled with its place in the modern era. Capcom is treating *Resident Evil 2* as a brand-new release, using the 1998 classic as little more than a foundation for bigger and better things. Take the headquarters of the Racoon City Police Department, a building cast in increasingly bleak shades of disrepair once rookie cop Leon S. Kennedy arrives on the scene – one week late to a new job only to find himself immediately swept up in a whirlpool of viscera and violence.

For many of us it's a familiar location, one with a lot of history attached to it; memories of strangled screams echoing out from behind tear-soaked sofa cushions. But seeing it presented this way, rebuilt lovingly in the ever-impressive RE Engine – Capcom's proprietary toolset that allowed its in-house development teams to put so much life and energy into experimental first-person horror experience *Resident Evil VII* early last year – and it's difficult to find the room to breathe.

It looks incredible, and even better in motion. The depth to the spaces, the detail found in the particle and lighting effects, the sense of presence each of the shambling zombies holds over its claustrophobic corridors is truly startling. The implementation of third-person movement and combat mechanics realigns Resident Evil with the leanings of perhaps its most famed entry, that of 2004's *Resident Evil 4*, while the revamped artificial

■ You may notice that Leon S. Kennedy and Claire Redfield look and sound a little different to how you remember them. That's because the studio has recast the duo; not only do they both have new voice actors, but body models too, to make use of the RE Engine's photogrammetry capabilities.





IN BRIEF
Capcom is re-imagining the 1998 survival-horror classic for a brand-new audience and generation of consoles





Left: Capcom is pushing this as less of a remake and more of a re-imagining, using the foundations of the 1998 original to create something that feels fresh and exciting in the modern era.



intelligence of enemy AI, the implementation of full dismemberment systems – you haven't truly lived until you've severed an encroaching combatants arm at the bone with a few well-placed shots – and the ability to see the player character become visibly weary and scarred from assaults puts this on a plane of existence above any of its potential competition.

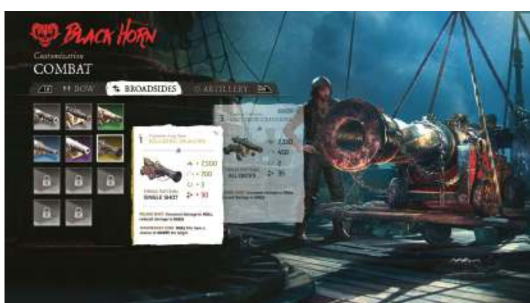
That in itself is misleading, though, as *Resident Evil 2* has no obvious competition to speak of. The only things it is fighting with is your memories of the past and the trajectory of the franchise it belongs to; as *VII* looks to thrust the series in a new sustainable direction, this title only seeks to pull us back into the past, in an instant making us only too aware of how far the survival-horror genre could have gone had Capcom not steered towards more action-oriented experiences in the Noughts.

"RESIDENT EVIL 2 FEELS LIKE A LANDMARK MOMENT, A RETURN TO FORM FOR A GENRE THAT HAS LONG GRAPPLED WITH ITS PLACE IN THE MODERN ERA."

There is something truly haunting about *Resident Evil 2*'s presentation. The game's playable spaces are as expressive as they have ever been. They are forging a true sense of place in a world that feels somewhat rooted in reality – the retro aesthetic of the environmental and character designs feeling better realised than it ever has before. The shift in perspective, the renewed visual style and new-found affinity for guts and gore feel like a match made in survival horror heaven. There's still a part of us that wishes we were receiving a more faithful remake that echoed that of the original design – perhaps made in the style of the legendary *Resident Evil* remake – but that's just the nostalgia talking. Take a step back and you'll be able to appreciate this for what it is; one of the most impressive and visually striking games coming in 2019.









The game was originally scheduled to launch this winter, but Ubisoft has delayed the game into 2019 to give the Singapore studio time to refine its core pillars and performance. A beta is still scheduled to go live this year however.

SKULL & BONES LOOKS MORE IMPRESSIVE THAN EVER



DISHONOUR AMONG THIEVES

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT** | DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT SINGAPORE** | RELEASE: **TBC 2019** | PLAYERS: **TBC**

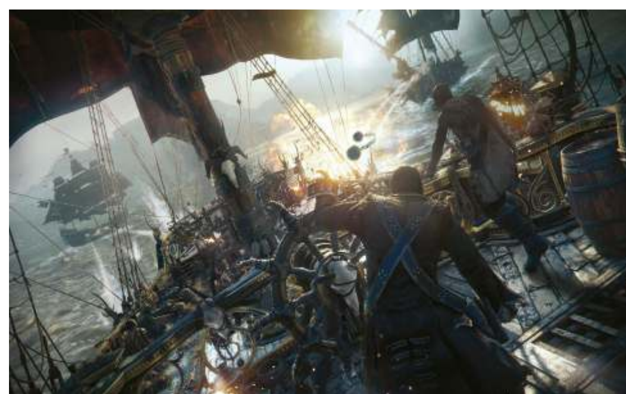
It's taken a little while, but we're finally beginning to see the appeal of *Skull & Bones*. Ubisoft has been teasing its naval-combat game for a little while now, and it has always looked like something of an undercard for the publisher – a gamble in an otherwise safe line-up of titles scheduled for 2018 and beyond. But the more we see of it in action the more we find ourselves sold on the concept and execution.

Skull & Bones might have risen out of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, but there is so much more to this title than meets the eye. Much like *For Honor*, it's a game centred around one very core (not to mention niche, if we're being honest) premise, and never does it dare waver away from it. *Skull & Bones* wants to take the ship-to-ship combat that we've seen detailed in oh so much pirate fiction over the decades and it wants to bring it to life, with your hands charged with dictating the action.

Sea Of Thieves has, of course, already beaten *Skull & Bones* to market in this respect, although Ubisoft Singapore's offering looks far more mature by way of comparison. This is a predominantly competitive game, blurring the lines between single-player questing and co-operative multiplayer battles – though co-op can quickly turn nasty when rare loot is on the line. What's different here is that *Skull & Bones* looks to be a game with a high skill-ceiling, governed by deep game systems rather than intuitive mechanics like its closest rival.

IN BRIEF
Ubisoft's attempt to take the naval combat that rose to fame in *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* and spin it off into its own game

It's the recently unveiled Hunting Grounds game mode that has sold us on it. It's the game's starring idea, which sees budding pirates taking on missions to take out merchant ships to acquire lucrative goods by force. You start by choosing the right ship for the job, kitting it out with your preferred weaponry and cosmetic items before taking to the seas to hunt down and strike your target. This can involve anything from plotting routes with the strongest wind flow for maximum speed, or around islands to help aid in stealth assaults, or perhaps even throwing up friendly sails to help deceive patrolling ships or powerful fortresses that sit on the horizon. These missions can easily go awry, of course, and so then you can call in the assistance of other friendly player ships to take down powerful boss vessels, manoeuvring with deft positioning and utilising your weaponry to inflict maximum damage. Of course, once that's all said and done there's no telling which of your friends will quickly turn into a foe to take advantage of you in the aftermath.



Above: *Skull & Bones* is a ship-to-ship naval combat game that offers both PvE and PvP components, with the two often intertwining for maximum carnage.

Skull & Bones looks like an intriguing prospect, and something of a unique commodity for console gamers. We're certainly excited to see more, even if that does now necessitate a wait into 2019.





WHY I ♥...

HORIZON ZERO DAWN

ALEXANDER SHIMOV, PROJECT MANAGER, ALLODS TEAM

You know, actually, **Horizon Zero Dawn** *from 2017, I love. I really enjoyed both the narrative and the combat. And the graphics, of course. Combined altogether it was a very good story with quite intense combat on the highest difficulty level, especially in the add-on expansion.*

I liked what Guerrilla Games did. It was crazy. It had made all these Killzones and I was wondering whether it would be doing Killzone again, but it's probably Horizon 2.

We also looked into Killzone when we researched the controls for **Warface**, *because Guerrilla Games is one of the greatest studios that made PlayStation first-person shooters, so it was a great example to look at. It has a similar essence of movement.*

So, yes, Horizon is a game I love, but the list is quite big.

> "Combined altogether it was a very good story with quite intense combat on the highest difficulty level"

ALEXANDER SHIMOV, PROJECT MANAGER, ALLODS TEAM



WORLDS COLLIDE

WE SIT DOWN WITH INSOMNIAC GAMES TO DISCUSS **SPIDER-MAN**, THE LARGEST AND MOST AMBITIOUS GAME THE STUDIO HAS DARED TAKE ON IN ITS 24-YEAR HISTORY

"Listen, *I get it*. I know that 99.9 per cent of people are only buying this game because they want to swing around as Spider-Man – and trust me, you're going to be doing a ton of that in this game – but I think that when you look back at the great comic book stories, when you look at the best Marvel movies, what they all do so well is that they tell a human story. You get to experience the person behind the mask as much as the person wearing it," considers creative director Bryan Intihar, speaking exclusively to **games™**. "To really capture a true Spider-Man experience I feel like you couldn't just play as Spider-Man."

Few videogame studios have understood the core of this character better than Insomniac. It knows that Spider-Man is only as legendary as the challenges that Peter Parker encounters, regardless of whether he is facing them inside of the suit or out of it. That has been established time and time again over the last 56 years; there have been countless interpretations of the character in that time across every entertainment medium you could think of – be it comic books, film, TV, animation, videogames and beyond.

Spider-Man's enduring success has established a loyal fanbase, one broad enough to ensure that every fan will likely carry a different perspective on what elements make Spider-Man such an iconic and long-lasting figure. All of that can create seismic, intractable expectations for a creative team – particularly one charged with overseeing a project as immediately impressive and anticipated as this upcoming PS4 exclusive.

Insomniac might have been creating videogames for close to 25 years, but the studio knows it has never faced anything quite like this before. *Spider-Man* is a creative challenge the studio isn't taking lightly, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that has the whole world watching. "There's an unbelievable amount of responsibility for us to get this right," admits Intihar, the tone of his voice suggesting that this isn't the first time he has had to »

consider the weight that has fallen onto his shoulders. "Spider-Man is easily one of the most popular characters in pop culture. The character is so important to so many people that they just want it to be everything that they have in their head. That is super exciting and, at the same time, it's also unbelievably scary.

"But," he maintains, "I think having that excitement and fear is what has kept us on our toes throughout this whole development process. We are going to make the best game that we possibly can."

MAN BEHIND THE MASK

It all begins with the man behind the mask. That's where the best Spider-Man stories have always been born, as Peter Parker's two worlds collide – the conflict seeping out of every facet of his life, the inevitable fallout affecting the loved ones that continue to support and surround him.

Insomniac is setting its sights on a similar set-up and it's doing so in a spectacular fashion, crafting a relatable story within the biggest open world it has ever created alongside responsive web-swinging that surpasses anything we've seen in a videogame and incredible acrobatic combat that captures the playfulness and improvisational nature of the character. The world design, the movement, the combat and the fun way that progression is being handled are, of course, points of interest in isolation (and trust us, we'll get to each of them in time) though it's the wider experience that has really gotten our senses tingling. We've been waiting a lifetime for a Spider-Man game that approaches the character with this much authority and reverence.

It's as Intihar insists: "To deliver a true Spider-Man experience you have to see Peter Parker's life, you have to really deliver on the human element to the story. One of the reasons that the character is so beloved is that he has a vulnerability and relatability to him. When Peter succeeds, Spider-Man fails." And that, as Intihar knows only too well as a life-long fan of The Amazing Spider-Man, goes both ways. Peter might spend a hell of a lot of his time battling villains in a spectacular fashion, but his problems are often rooted in far more familiar areas. That's an element to Spider-Man's set-up that Insomniac is eager to explore. "In a lot of great Marvel stories there's almost this soap opera nature to them. There is drama outside of the superhero action, right? I feel like Peter, of all of Marvel's characters, personifies that really well. We wanted to have that back and forth, for you to see and experience both sides [to the character]," says Intihar, adding, "that's the ultimate goal, to explore how those two worlds collide."

This is one reason – of many, admittedly – that we find ourselves drawn to Insomniac's take on Spider-Man far more than we were to any of Activision's attempts in the last decade. Insomniac understands that there is more to making a successful Spider-Man game than mere mechanical design or fan-baiting alone. There's comedy, heart and drama to the best stories and the best representations of the character; the reason Peter Parker has persisted over time and maintained his place in the pantheon of popular culture is because we can see a little piece of him reflected in each and every one of us. More than that though, he represents the best version of what we could be – it's liberating to see that reflected in a videogame so forthrightly, seeping out of the story and into the core play itself.

The dichotomy between great power and great responsibility has been leveraged to tell countless stories over the years, used as a vessel to explore what happens when an ordinary kid

"WHILE I WANT TO FEEL SUPER RIGHT AWAY, I STILL WANT TO FEEL EVEN MORE SUPER OVER TIME"

Insomniac has crafted an incredible open world to contain this adventure. It's four-times larger than Sunset City, packed with challenges, missions and dynamic encounters. Fans of the wider Marvel universe will also want to keep an eye out for famous landmarks, such as the Sanctum Sanctorum.

***Spider-Man* is being developed by Insomniac Games, the studio responsible for Ratchet & Clank, Resistance and *Sunset Overdrive*. The upcoming PS4 exclusive is scheduled to arrive on 7 September 2018.**

with a good heart stumbles across extraordinary powers. The fact that Insomniac dares to deliver a project such as this, while still improving on the core facets and tenets of every Spider-Man game that has preceded it, warrants excitement alone.

Of course the studio, eager to avoid spoilers, still refuses to detail core aspects to Parker's life behind the mask. We know that he works in a lab, but Insomniac has constantly stopped short of confirming the name of the company he is employed by. We know that the 23-year old is eight years into his career as the friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man, but we don't yet know what he has lost along the way. We know that Mary Jane Watson will play a big role in the game (a playable character and journalist for The Daily Bugle), but the full state of their 'it's complicated' relationship has yet to be laid bare. We know that Peter's presence will be felt in the game through cinematics and interactions with the likes of Aunt May and Miles Morales, though whether he will be playable in critical components of the main story remains a mystery.

We aren't all that surprised by the secrecy. The story of this Spider-Man game has been kept largely under wraps; Insomniac's lead writer Jon Paquette and long-time Marvel scribe Christos Gage have co-written a monster amount of material – reportedly the equivalent of a 3,000-page novel – alongside the studio's own Ben Arfmann and legendary Spider-Man writer Dan Slott, who have also contributed.

This is all in service of creating a Spider-Man story that stays true to the legacy while still being given the space to evolve over the course of the game and, integrally, comfortably exist in his own pocket of the Marvel universe. Insomniac's Spider-Man is separate from the 616 and from any of the other versions you may have seen of the character over the years. The successful collaboration between Marvel Games and Insomniac has ensured that this version of Peter – donning a suit with a white spider splashed across the torso – has room to evolve throughout the course of the game, while remaining familiar enough that he can duck into crossover events in the realms of the comics if he is needed.

"We want to stay true to the character, but we also want to mix things up a bit – the white suit is a good example of that. You look at that character, you look at that suit and you just know that it is Spider-Man… but there's a little something different about it – something that says that *this* is the Insomniac Spider-Man, that he's a little more unique to us," says Intihar, not that he will dare get into spoiler territory as to where it comes from.



Combat has always been a bit lousy in Spider-Man games – we're looking at you *Shattered Dimensions*, and every game before. Thankfully, Insomniac has taken a different approach, ensuring that fighting always feels acrobatic, natural and expressive.

"With Marvel there's a reason for everything, and we want to make sure that there is a cool story attached to [the suit]. We wanted to make sure that there was something that identified it as *our* Spider-Man and, trust me, there's an interesting story reason surrounding how it came to be."

MOVEMENT AS AN EXPRESSION

"Swinging was the number one thing we knew we had to get right. It was *literally* the first thing that we worked on," says Intihar, teasing that he has a "very ugly looking video of Spider-Man swinging around a grey box world" buried somewhere on his computer. That's the original prototype that the studio put together three years ago, an important milestone for the studio as it worked »

BUILDING A BETTER SPIDER-MAN

INSOMNIAC DETAILS PROGRESSION AND CRAFTING

Progression has been a closely guarded secret over the last 12 months, though we were steadfast in our resolve to get some details out of Spider-Man creative director Bryan Intihar, no matter how difficult it might prove to be… "There's actually two different types of progression and I'd love to go over both!" Oh, that was easy.

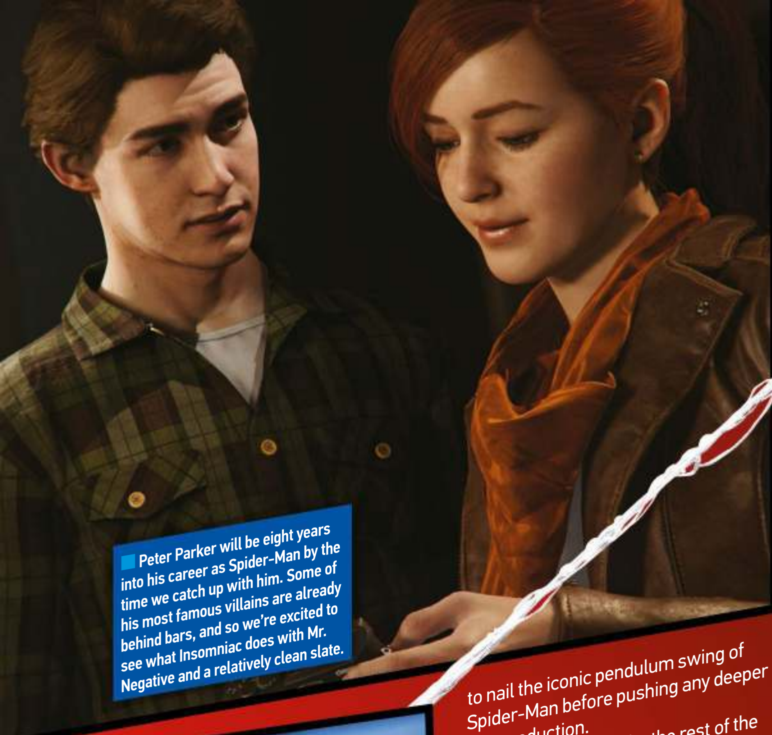
"As you play the main story, and some of the optional quests, you're going to be gaining experience points. Eventually you'll reach your threshold like you would in another game, and you level up, earning a skill point, and that can be spent on basically one of three areas," he explains, noting that those three areas are effectively based around the core of the character and experience. You can invest in improving traversal, increasing your capabilities in combat or in a third category that he describes as a "mixed bag between stealth and all of the other things".

That's only "one half of the production pie" though. As Intihar tells us, spending time out in the open world completing activities is how you begin to improve your suit and gadgets. "It's stopping dynamic crimes, it's the Taskmaster challenges, it's clearing out the Kingpin bases… it's a bunch of other things I'm probably not allowed to talk about yet; completing all of these things gives you a type of token."

These various tokens will allow you the opportunity to make different modifications to your suit, such as reducing melee or firearm damage. They can be used to craft all-new suits to wear out in the open world and, should you collect enough tokens and XP, used to help you switch out the special abilities that are inherent to each custom suit to mix and match power and design as you see fit. The tokens can also be used to upgrade and earn new gadgets, which can later be incorporated into combat and traversal. "Basically," he says, "think about it like this: XP gives you skill points and open world activities give you different tokens that you can use for crafting."



The events of the story will take place over just a handful of weeks in Autumn, meaning that much the cycle between day and night will be shifted depending on the needs of the main missions. Once you've completed the game you'll be able to adjust the time as you see fit.

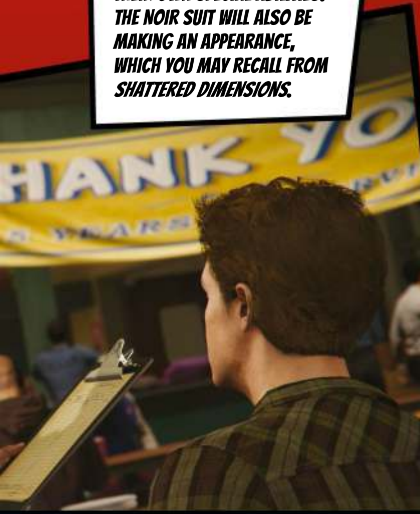


Peter Parker will be eight years into his career as Spider-Man by the time we catch up with him. Some of his most famous villains are already behind bars, and so we're excited to see what Insomniac does with Mr. Negative and a relatively clean slate.





ALONG WITH THE TRADITIONAL SUIT AND ADVANCED SUIT WE ALSO KNOW THAT THE SPIDER-PUNK, VELOCITY AND INFINITY WAR IRON SPIDER SUITS WILL BE AVAILABLE AS PRE-ORDER BONUSES, EACH WITH THEIR OWN SPECIAL ABILITIES. THE NOIR SUIT WILL ALSO BE MAKING AN APPEARANCE, WHICH YOU MAY RECALL FROM *SHATTERED DIMENSIONS*.



to nail the iconic pendulum swing of Spider-Man before pushing any deeper into production.

Intihar – much like the rest of the staff at Insomniac – is keenly aware of how important the aesthetic of that pendulum swing is to selling *Spider-Man* to fans that would have otherwise been sat on the fence. The character is, after all, Marvel's most acrobatic, expressive and performative superhero; the city is his stage and the city is always watching. Insomniac knew that locking this aspect of the game down was effectively more important than anything else it could achieve for a lot of perspective players. That is largely due to the shadow cast by just a handful of decades-old videogames. "I'm not gonna lie to you and say we don't realise that there's been a lot of other Spider-Man games," Intihar says, laughing. "Just go to my Twitter feed and you'll find that fans send me clips of what all of the other games have done every single day."

He laughs, but we get the sense that the overbearing presence of what has come before has kept Insomniac on track. Fans are desperate for a game to truly capture the freedom and manoeuvrability of web-swinging – a system that accentuates the creativity and freedom inherent to the character – in a way that lives up to the memory of Neversoft's celebrated *Spider-Man* from 2000 and Treyarch's seminal 2004 effort, *Spider-Man 2*. Overcoming nostalgia is a herculean task, and that's why Insomniac pumped so many years and resources – leveraging its experience with the likes of Ratchet & Clank and *Sunset Overdrive* – into ensuring that it has created traversal systems that will allow you to navigate open-world spaces in a way that you've never before experienced.

"We obviously looked at all of those [past] games; we would be foolish as developers to not see what other games have done, but at the end of the day we wanted Spider-Man to feel like an Insomniac game. I feel like that's why Sony and Marvel came to us… they wanted us to create a Spider-Man experience [that] also has the DNA of Insomniac," he says, before giving us further insight into the approach of the studio here. "It wasn't about us saying, 'Well, we're just gonna recreate *Spider-Man 2*'. It was more, 'how do we take elements that people love from those games, the feeling that those games gave people, and build upon our experience with games like *Sunset Overdrive* to kind of meld those roles together?'"

Insomniac's plan, as Intihar tells it, was to ensure that you felt like Spider-Man right off the bat. We are, after all, being put in control of an experienced superhero rather than the high-school hero so often portrayed in media and revisionist comic book stories. This is a Spider-Man eight years into his career; as the game opens we see Spidey at his peak, in the process of putting his greatest foe to date – Wilson 'The Kingpin' Fisk – behind bars on The Raft along with the likes of Electro, Rhino, Scorpion, Shocker and Vulture. For the game to immediately reflect Peter's experience as Spider-Man, his movement through the city had to be an expression of his ever-increasing confidence.

Finding that balance hasn't been easy. "That was a big factor for us, because we wanted you to feel like a superhero right away," Intihar tells us. "Listen, I can't swing in real life and I can't cling to the walls. I don't want it to be so hard in the game that I can't fulfil the fantasy of being Spider-Man. That being said, it's got to have a long enough tail that there is a level of skill and mastery to it… while I want to feel super right away, I still want to feel even more super over time."

You see this reflected in the micro and the macro of the way Spider-Man traverses New York City, an open-world concrete jungle gym that Insomniac teases is four-times the size of *Sunset Overdrive*'s Sunset City. To hit the basics once again, yes, your momentum and positioning does affect the trajectory of Spider-Man's movement and, *yes*, the webs do stick to walls. Sold.

The basics see Parker using skill proficiencies such as the web-zip – which sees Spidey throwing out two webs to pull himself forward or make sharp turns in the air – and his enhanced agility – which lets the web-head run along walls and leap gracefully over and through obstacles – to navigate the city with ease. But as you progress through the game, as you unlock new suit abilities and upgrade elements such as your web shooters, you will soon find new and improved ways to traverse the environment. Insomniac wants movement to be an expression of the player, and the further you progress through the game – the more comfortable you begin to feel with the various controls and systems – the more satisfying the fast and fluid movement systems will become in your hands.

There is a fast-travel system in the game, but Insomniac has built its traversal in such a way that you should never feel that need to use it. That's the dream, anyway. This, all of this, is effectively an extension of the work the studio has already done with *Sunset Overdrive*. "You know, a lot of words we use to describe traversal are flow and fluidity. The same was true with what we did on *Sunset*. It was about creating a sense of momentum, a sense of flow, a sense of fluidity and a sense of, 'Oh, I hit a wall… okay, I'm just gonna run right up it and then I'm gonna leap over it!'," says Intihar, who notes that a similar mentality has been brought over to this project, with the studio working hard to make sure that Spider-Man never slows down or stops at an obstruction unless you want him to.

"That was a really hard thing for us to solve… but it should never feel like a chore to swing. When it comes to traversal – kind of like how it was when you were running the rails of *Sunset* – we're really about having a sense of expression in the way Spider-Man moves, that there's no obstacle too big."

PUNCHING ABOVE HIS WEIGHT

Plenty of energy has been expended discussing Insomniac's approach to building its very own pocket of the Marvel U to play in and of the work that has gone into streamlining the game's movement systems since the reveal of *Spider-Man* in 2017. Though if there is any one area where there remains a question mark, as with all games baring the Spider-Man branding over the years, it is in regards to the combat. A mere street brawler Spidey is not; for a game to accurately reflect that is, clearly, easier said than done. For Intihar the goal was simple enough: "It was about getting his butt off the ground, getting him in the air and really leveraging the acrobatic nature of the character."

We aren't going to argue with that assessment. The execution of that concept, on the other hand, has been »

something of a challenge. You see, Insomniac is known for developing kinetic shooters with expressive weapon design, and that's across both first- and third-person proficiencies. For the team to build a satisfying brawler – one that would leverage the power set and core strengths of the character – it had to go back to basics, building out entirely new systems and mechanics while devoting large swaths of time to iteration and refinement. "While we had *Feral Rites* [an adventure-brawler, released in 2016 for Oculus Rift] in development around the same time as *Spider-Man*, we didn't have a ton of experience making a third-person brawler – where you're using melee and other devices in combat."

"You look at Ratchet, you look at Resistance and you look at *Overdrive*... we're a big shooter [company] and we're really well known for our creative weapons. It definitely was a little bit of a learning curve," Intihar admits, revealing that it took an honest assessment of what Peter can and can't do in the space it was building to set the team on the right path forward. "We asked ourselves really early on, 'well, what can Spider-Man do that others can't?' and then the word improvisation started to come up a lot."

Looking at a close to final build now, the results should speak for themselves. Combat is fast and frenetic, expressive and fluid – everything that you'd expect to see from an experienced Spider-Man running around the rooftops of New York City.

The animation of Spider-Man is particularly impressive. Peter moves with the balletic grace that you'd expect to see from the character, an element of the game's design that Intihar reveals is a smooth blend of hand-animation and motion capture. "You know, it's hard to get someone to actually swing kick in real life," he laughs, continuing. "But the benefits of living in LA is that we have a lot of great stunt people who live here, and we've had people who've done many super hero things, and it's amazing to see what they can do when they're just flipping around. So it's actually a combination of both."

To really nail the feel Insomniac continued to hone in, working to strike a careful balance between Peter's keen intellect (introducing an array of abilities and gadgets into combat) and his proficiency over the web shooters (which are mechanical in design, in case you were wondering). "We went heavy on web usage. Whether it's the quick, rapid-fire webs or looking for things in the environment that you can grab and pull," he says, noting that Insomniac was keen to give players the freedom to use webs in the middle of combat or to help assist in moving stealthily through levels, should you choose to do so. This is a Spider-Man experience where you have the opportunity to shape the evolution of the character, and that will manifest itself in combat as you begin to become more comfortable with the combat systems and add new abilities to your arsenal. "When the gadgets [and] suit powers really started to get implemented – when we got him up in the air – that's when it really felt like a Spider-Man experience met an Insomniac game to me."

Looking at all of this together in action, you begin to see a side to Peter Parker that we've never quite seen replicated on film before. This is the Spider-Man that you remember from the panels; combat isn't built around extensive combos, instead it's about managing groups of enemies in a highly improvisational and acrobatic fashion. It's about crowd control and using the environment to your advantage, of getting up into aerial spaces and quickly dispatching foes in any way that you see fit. Batman Arkham this is not, although we understand why you might want to use that as a point of reference.

Intihar likes to tell this story – a reoccurring incident, tracking the Arkham trilogy over the years – from his days as a community manager on *Resistance 2* to producer of *Fuse* and director of project management of *Sunset* that we'd like to share with you: "It's funny but – and I remember this like it was yesterday – I can literally remember driving to lunch with my co-workers around the time that Rocksteady's Batman games were coming out and I would always say, 'Man, we *need* the Marvel version of Arkham,' Intihar recalls with a chuckle. "And now, just a few years later, to be given the opportunity to work on that – to work on *Spider-Man* – is spectacular."

When you hear a story such as this and then glance at *Spider-Man*, perhaps you can see the connective tissue – Marvel's very own version of the Arkham games. But the reality is that *Spider-Man* has far more going for it. Its combat in particular is far more dynamic and expressive than it may at first seem.

The way that gadgets are implemented into combat is seamless; our favourite thus far is the Tripwire – a device that connects to enemies or the environment and, when triggered, fires out a web line that reels an enemy back in. Holding down the punch button launches enemies into the air, and from there you can either hit them with a barrage of hits or use webs to push and pull them in different directions and into the path of incoming enemies.

Environmental hazards can be brought into play, with Spidey able to whip items such as barrels and car doors at aggressors or even bring items in the environment crashing down on unsuspecting foes. You can use web shots to keep enemies in place and utilise web-zip to quickly close gaps – the same mechanics that you use to navigate the city so easily creating a new dynamic in combat that only improves the longer that you spend with it. "The combat team worked their butts off to get this right," admits Intihar. "It was extremely hard; it was, in terms of overall development, definitely one of our greatest challenges."

Another element that the team had to consider – something almost every other developer of open-world action games never need even worry about – was the core principles of Spider-Man and how that ties into his actions. Batman might bludgeon people half to death, but Peter knows that with great power comes great responsibility; that's something Insomniac had to tie into its combat and progression systems.

"We've made a lot of games where you shoot people, right? And a lot of them have monsters; it's either cute ones from Ratchet or scary ones from Resistance, or somewhere in between for *Sunset*, right?," says Intihar, noting an intrinsic difference between Spider-Man and the heroes of its other titles, there can be no incidental deaths and the studio has attempted to account for that. "It's funny, I remember back at E3 2017 when we showed the guy getting kicked off the ledge. We pulled him back to safety and we slammed him down to ground, and I didn't realise how much that was going to be a hot-button topic that we didn't kill the guy."

"Spider-Man doesn't kill people, and so I think [dealing] with that was definitely a challenge. I think it affects some mission design and combat design. We have a thing where basically if you kick an enemy off a ledge, and you don't have that time to grab him, Pete shoots out a little web, almost like a mini trip wire, that sticks to the guy, and »

The studio has done a truly fantastic job with the way in which you will traverse the city. Web-swinging has never looked this fast or fluid, and we can't wait to waste away hours exploring NYC from the rooftops.

DLC is coming for *Spider-Man*, and the first will focus on one of Spider-Man's best friend/foes. That's right, 'The City That Never Sleeps' will hinge around Black Cat. She's expected to make an appearance in the main game, but we're excited none the less.



"THIS IS BY FAR THE BIGGEST OPEN-WORLD GAME THAT WE HAVE EVER MADE. IT'S SEVERAL, SEVERAL TIMES LARGER THAN THE WORLD WE CREATED FOR SUNSET OVERDRIVE"

THE ROGUES' GALLERY

MISTER NEGATIVE

FIRST APPEARANCE: *Free Comic Book Day May 2007 (Spider-Man)*
The Spider-Man universe's very own Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, Martin Li is a charitable businessman by day and a psychotic super-powered gang leader… well, also by day. His manifestation as his criminal alter ego isn't a day-and-night thing.

ELECTRO

FIRST APPEARANCE: *The Amazing Spider-Man #9*
Max Dillon gained his powers in the comics after being struck by lightning while working on a power line. This particular incarnation of Dillon is based on a redesign of the character from 2009, with facial scarring now taking the place of his distinctive mask.

WILSON FISK

FIRST APPEARANCE: *The Amazing Spider-Man #50*
Taking down the famous Kingpin looks to be how the action of *Spider-Man* will kick off. In the comics, Fisk's criminal underworld was a constant thorn in Spidey's side as well as the other heroes of New York (Daredevil most famously).

VULTURE

FIRST APPEARANCE: *The Amazing Spider-Man #2*
Another all-time classic villain, Adrian Toomes was most recently portrayed in *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, but has a more traditional look in this game. He's an engineer who built a flight harness himself, falling into crime in his pursuit of revenge against a former partner.

RHINO

FIRST APPEARANCE: *The Amazing Spider-Man #41*
A former Russian enforcer, Aleksei Sytsevich has more than a thing or two in common with The Hulk in some regards, having been experimented on with chemical and radiation therapies to turn him into a super-strong behemoth. He's a true test of Spidey's might.

SCORPION

FIRST APPEARANCE: *The Amazing Spider-Man #19*
Mac Gargan is a classic Spider-Man baddie and also has some connection to J. Jonah Jameson in his origin. This one-time private investigator was experimented on and lost his mind, often seeking revenge against the man who once hired him, Jameson.

THE **VILLAINS** YOU SHOULD EXPECT TO CAUSE YOU SOME TROUBLE

SHOCKER

FIRST APPEARANCE: *The Amazing Spider-Man #46*

In his original form Herman Schultz built his own super-powered suit as a means to be a more effective criminal. The lifelong malcontent used the Shocker suit to blast shockwaves through bank vault doors in a string of robberies. Seems like that last part hasn't changed.

SILVER SABLE

FIRST APPEARANCE: *The Amazing Spider-Man #265*

More often an anti-hero figure than an antagonist for Spider-Man, Silver Sablinova is a mercenary who in this game is hired by NYC's current Mayor, Norman Osborn, to hunt down, capture and possibly kill our friendly neighbourhood web-slinger. Fingers crossed she'll see sense later.

so as he falls he gets sucked to the side of the building."

That isn't the only concession the team has had to make. A standard metric in open-world game design will see the player character looting resources off of enemy corpses, rummaging through boxes in the world and generally doing anything they can to line their pockets. But Peter is in the business of stopping thieves, not becoming one just to purchase new upgrades, suits or abilities. "Obviously, we don't want… Peter's not stealing money and he's not going to be rummaging through the garbage. This was a challenge but I definitely think we met it," continues Intihar. "We just had to think about it a little bit harder. It's one of the challenges with the character, but thankfully I work with a lot of smart people and they figured all of this out. It's something we have been conscious of and, you know, we just want to be respectful to the franchise."

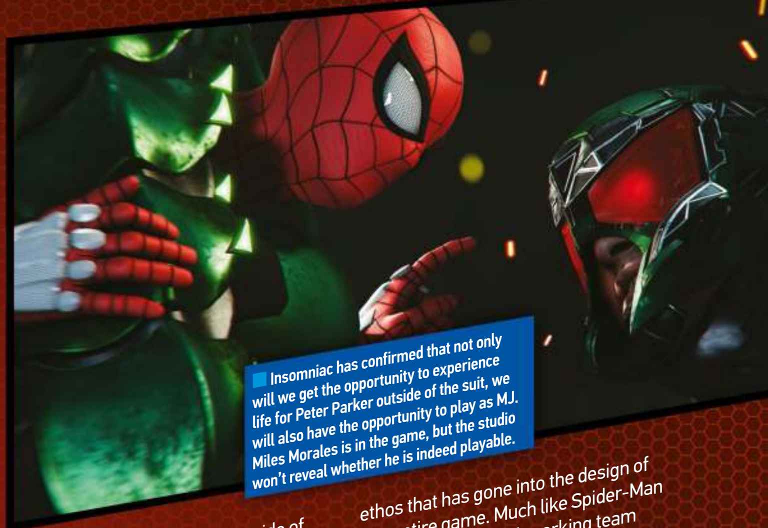
> "NEW YORK CITY'S REALLY KNOWN FOR HAVING A LOT OF FIRE ESCAPES. THOSE ARE A TRAVERSAL NIGHTMARE"

CITY THAT NEVER SLEEPS

"This is by far the biggest open-world game that we have ever made. It's several, several times larger than the world we created for *Sunset Overdrive*," Intihar tells us, and we begin to interject with a question regarding content, only for him to leap back in. "Man, it's massively, *massively* bigger."

You don't need to tell Insomniac that it has created something truly ridiculous in *Spider-Man*. The studio is only too aware of the scale and scope of this project and of the expectations that naturally comes with that.

With so much focus on the web-swinging, on the story and on the combat it can be all too easy to ignore the playground all of this is occurring in. When Intihar tells us "very early on we decided that we wanted – we *needed* – to treat New York City as a character," it doesn't sound like mere hyperbole. This is a living and breathing game space, open from the beginning of the game for you to patrol and explore. That's been yet another challenge for Insomniac – its spaces are, traditionally, filled with enemies and little else. That isn't the case here. "A big part of the feeling of being in that place [NYC] is the people.



Insomniac has confirmed that not only will we get the opportunity to experience life for Peter Parker outside of the suit, we will also have the opportunity to play as MJ. Miles Morales is in the game, but the studio won't reveal whether he is indeed playable.

It's the movement of the city outside of Spider-Man, or outside of you. We had to do New York City as New York City. It couldn't just be an empty space. That doesn't feel like Spider-Man to me. He needs to interact with pedestrians and you need to see them reacting to crimes and to what's happening around them."

Insomniac's NYC has hundreds of NPCs on foot and in vehicles, all of them dynamically reacting to Spider-Man's presence and to crimes happening around them. There's a main quest to be followed and collectibles packed into almost every corner of the main Manhattan Island – the game world comprised of eight main districts spanning Hell's Kitchen, Harlem, the Financial District, the Upper East Side and more. There are side quests aplenty, with the likes of Black Cat and Taskmaster off in the background causing havoc for you to put a stop too, while old friend Harry Osborn tasks you with keeping an eye on Oscorp research facilities strewn across the city's rooftops.

"Our environment team and our gameplay design team really put a lot of time and effort to make all of that, and to make sure it doesn't feel like it's ever interrupting traversal or combat," considers Intihar. "It was really, really important for us from a world-building standpoint not just to have everything be a perfect box. If you look at any city, a lot of buildings have different shapes. Like, for example, New York City's really known for having a lot of fire escapes. Those are a traversal nightmare. It isn't what you want to be dealing with when you're swinging, right?

"But the truth is, we should deal with that because this is Spider-Man. We put a lot of time into him just being able to… say you're on the ground and you start moving up to the rooftop, you can literally just web your way up through that fire escape. Say you are swinging by a building and you start wall running, and you're going right into a fire escape, he literally just hops over or under it and keeps going," says Intihar, effectively giving us a wonderful insight into the ethos that has gone into the design of this entire game. Much like Spider-Man himself, for this hard-working team there is no problem too big to overcome.

This is Marvel's biggest investment into the interactive entertainment space to date. It's also the first time that Insomniac has ever worked on another company's Intellectual Property in its 24-year history. *Spider-Man* is important to everybody involved in production and it is being treated as such. The result of all of that work is becoming clearer by the day: this is the Spider-Man experience that a hell of a lot of people have been waiting for and one that, frankly, many of us never thought we would ever receive.

Insomniac was approached by Marvel and Sony to work on *Spider-Man* for a reason. We believe that it is truly the only studio currently active in the industry that stands a chance at bringing this character, and his world, to life in a way that both stays true to his legacy and can function as a fantastic videogame – those two elements, as history has proven, aren't always easily interchangeable.

"I didn't know if Ted [Price] would go for it initially," Intihar laughs, explaining that the CEO and president would only sign off on the project if it were met with the necessary enthusiasm internally. "But when he presented the opportunity to us it was a resounding, 'Yes!' in the studio. "The first time that Marvel logo came up in a meeting, you could hear almost everybody [gasp] – like a big, deep breath. If it weren't for that reaction we probably wouldn't have done it."

So, has it been worth it? The creative director is clearly eager for fans to get *Spider-Man* into their hands come 7 September 2018 to try it for themselves, but in the meantime he is comforted by one indisputable fact: his folks finally understand what he is doing with his career. "You know, this is the first time in my life where I don't have to explain to my parents what I'm doing," Intihar says, erupting into laughter once again. "I just say 'it's Spider-Man' and they get it right away."

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THE EVER-ITERATING FOOTBALL SERIES IS TAKING ANOTHER LEAP FORWARD, BUT THIS TIME IT'S MORE ABOUT PLAYER EMPOWERMENT THAN TECHNOLOGY

15 WAYS FIFA 19 IS LETTING YOU PLAY YOUR WAY

KICK-OFF UPGRADE

1 You're either a Beatles person or an Elvis person, so *Pulp Fiction* told us. You can like both, but you have to be more one than the other. FIFA is kind of similar. You might be a FIFA player, but you really like FIFA Ultimate Team or playing Career or The Journey, or just playing against friends in the friendly mode. Well, EA has been working those more involved modes for years, but what it calls Kick-Off, the straight-to-the-pitch, one-off friendly mode that you play locally with friends, not so much. That all changes this year, with a lot more customisation and variety on offer that will open up the mode to let you play it the way you want to.

HOUSE RULES

2 Part of the expansion of Kick-Off is about letting you play your way, and in some ways codifying things we were already doing and making them official. For instance, how often have you played against a friend and said you would play a best of three matches? Or maybe you've said the first to three goals is the overall winner? Perhaps you miss the days when you could turn off fouls, bookings and everything else and just create carnage on the pitch? Good, because now you can. Settings for matches and goals, as well as a no rules mode, are all available in The New Kick-Off Mode so that you can structure your game time in a more interesting way.

MAKING MESS ABOUTS REAL

3 Now we get into the really cool stuff. We don't know about you, but we have definitely done things like say that only goals from distance count, or headers and volleys only. Well, Kick-Off Mode has those options now too, so when you square off against someone, or even the AI, you can set the game to only allow goals from outside the area, or only accept goals that are headers or volleys. That's kind of crazy, right? FIFA is actually making that an official way to experience the game, breaking free of the strictures of being an officially licensed football game to make those quick, mess-about games something real, and less reliant on an honour system among friends.

CRAZY NEW IDEAS

4 Perhaps our favourite addition to Kick-Off Mode, though, is Survival mode. Chances are it is exactly what you think it is: score a goal, and one of your players has to leave the pitch. So for every goal you go down to ten, then nine, then eight players, and so on. The player you lose is random, so it could completely mess with your team's shape, and it will definitely open up opportunities for the other side. It's an amazing leveller, and a way to create new tension between seasoned players. Plus, the tactical approach is fascinating. Do you try to hold on and score late? Or maybe let in a couple to get a player advantage and build momentum later? It's a lot of fun.

ADVANTAGE SETTINGS

5 If the concept of losing players one at a time doesn't sound like it's going to close the gap enough between you and your opponent then you'll be pleased to hear that Kick-Off Mode also includes Advantage settings. Clicking in the right stick on the team selection screen brings up the option to change the AI intelligence on each team and allocate pre-match goals. So, say you're playing against a younger player, you could give them a two-goal head start and set your AI to Semi-Pro while they have Legendary players, and see if that makes the experience a little more even. Or you could just really challenge yourself against tougher opposition. It's really up to you.

»

"YOU CAN NOW MAKE YOUR FRIENDLY GAME INTO A CUP FINAL, SEMI FINAL OR GROUP GAME IN A COMPETITION LIKE THE CHAMPIONS LEAGUE OR EUROPA LEAGUE"

ADD SOME STYLE

6 If you have been a player who only really plays FIFA through Kick-Off Mode then that also means you've not ever had the pleasure of getting the full atmosphere and ceremony of a cup final or a game that means something in career mode or in competitions in Ultimate Team. As you might have guessed by now, this is no longer the case. You can now make your friendly game into a cup final, semi final or group game in a competition like the Champions League or Europa League, also newly added to FIFA, having grabbed the official licenses this year. There's really nothing like that anthem before kick off to get the hairs on your arms standing up.

TRACK YOUR STATS

7 The last important addition to The New Kick-Off Mode is your Kick-Off Name, a new ID tracking system that means every friendly contest you enter into, online or otherwise, is tracked. Your Kick-Off ID is separate from your EA Account or your console login, but can be linked to EA's network or to a PSN account. EA is still working on linking it to Gamertags on Xbox, but we don't imagine it will be too big an issue. And your Kick-Off account doesn't just track your wins and losses; you can see what your possession stats look like for all games, what parts of the pitch you attack most often, and so much more.

ACTIVE TOUCH AND BETTER MOVEMENT

8 No FIFA game would be complete without a little technical enhancement and jargon, and that's delivered nicely by Active Touch, which is what EA is calling its improved player animation and physics system. There's far greater fluidity in the responses you'll get from players when they attack the ball now, making far more effort with any part of their body to take control (within the laws of the game, of course). Players seem to understand their own physicality better than before, stretching for the ball when it comes near and diving to head the ball even in open play if it's the only thing possible. You should find that the game is far more responsive to your commands and moves.



QUICK FLICKS

9 Thanks to the Active Touch system, players are far more reactive than they used to be, and that means they can handle the ball coming at them in all sorts of new ways. By extension, this means new tricks are possible, one of the most exciting of which is being able to flick the ball up by clicking in the right stick. You can press it before receiving the ball to lift the ball a little as you get it, or flick it on the run. And from the lofted position you can keep the tricks going by turning or hitting the ball on the volley. With a player with high-level skills, this little addition can be used to pull off some stunning new tricks that will result in really incredible goals.

DYNAMIC TACTICS

10 Having more control over your players goes beyond them just reacting to your controller inputs more frequently. *FIFA 19* introduces greater control over your tactical play with customised on-the-fly tactics. So rather than just pressing left and right on the D-pad to go to more attacking or defensive variations on what you're already doing, you can actually create custom presets for each setting to define what you need. Maybe defensive for you means playing possession football and sitting back behind the ball with no press, or perhaps ultra defensive is long ball, but only two players attacking the box. And attacking might mean pushing players wider, or a higher press or more crosses. You get to decide how your team interprets those commands.

50/50 BATTLES

11 So, this is a little peeve we had with FIFA in the past, and it's one that EA was apparently getting annoyed about too; players not really challenging for the ball and dodging out of the way. You see, the system before had a tendency to decide that one player had the ball over another, but a new 50/50 system means that if you want to, loose balls can be fought for. Ultimately, it will be the players' stats in strength, speed, balance and tackling than will determine the outcome, along with your own timing. Now those loose balls can be contested the way you want them to be, and not just allowed to run away from you.

TIMED FINISHING

12 This is a big one, and for particularly experienced and skilled players it could make a massive difference to your performance, as Timed Finishing allows for a risk-versus-reward gamble that could turn a pot shot into a screamer or a acrobatic bit of wishful thinking into a wonder goal. It works a little like active reload in Gears Of War where you have the chance to press shoot twice, and if you time it right you can add more power, accuracy or swerve (depending on what's needed) to the effort. You don't need to use it; pressing shoot once will work as normal, but it can be very effective. And the trainer shows a meter for learning this technique if you want.

"GETTING THE CHANCE TO WATCH THE VERY BEST PLAYERS FROM THE WEEKEND LEAGUE BATTLE IT OUT SHOULD SOUND LIKE AN INVITING PROSPECT"

FUT DIVISION RIVALS

13 Being able to control your experience of *FIFA 19* extends rather nicely into FIFA Ultimate Team this year too. As well as having Champions League and Europa League packs and all of the trappings of those competitions, you will also have the Division Rivals system, a new kind of ranked online multiplayer through which you earn Champions Points. There are ten divisions of similarly skilled players, and your placement within these divisions will be decided by weekly competitions (after some qualifying games that determine where you start). Points can be banked, and you can earn your way into the Weekend League, the big FUT competition.

"YOU HAVE THE CHANCE TO PRESS SHOOT TWICE, AND IF YOU TIME IT RIGHT YOU CAN ADD MORE POWER, ACCURACY OR SWERVE (DEPENDING ON WHAT'S NEEDED) TO THE EFFORT"



WATCH THE CHAMPS

14 Whether you've been playing FUT for years or are just starting out in *FIFA 19*, getting the chance to watch the very best players from the Weekend League battle it out should sound like an inviting prospect. But what if you could see more than just the way they play, but how they do it too? *FIFA 19* will introduce the ability to see a mock-up of the gamepad on screen, so you can watch exactly what button inputs are being used to pull of the moves and tricks players are using. It should prove to be an amazing learning tool, not least for mastering some of the game's new features.

PLAYER PICK PACKS

15 Wrapping up how FUT is more clearly tailored to your skill level and needs, Player Pick Packs will allow you to pick from one of five Gold players in the pack. So, with these special packs (one of which you can get as a *FIFA 19* preorder, and is Champions League themed) you can choose the Gold player who best suits your system, the chemistry of your side or any other metric you want to use. That should mean much better value from your investment, making sure that you really get something worth your while for the FUT pack purchase. It will be interesting to see how else packs might be innovated on to keep them fair and enticing as the loot box debate rages on.










TWO POINT
HOSPITAL™





MEDICINAL VALUE

AS TWO POINT HOSPITAL PREPARES TO LAUNCH, WE CATCH UP WITH THE TWO POINT STUDIOS TEAM TO REFLECT ON THE GAME-MAKING PROCESS AND THE EVOLUTION OF SIMULATION DESIGN



It didn't take us long to lose track of time. It felt as if we had been playing *Two Point Hospital*, in a preview but near-final state ahead of launch, for about an hour or so, but when we were nudged to join technical director and co-founder Ben Hymers and art director Mark Smart for our interview, we looked at the clock to see that three hours had passed. Three hours!

This is what good sim design should do to you. It should suck you into its reality and focus your attention to such a degree that everything else slips away. It can be, at times, the ultimate in immersive game playing, and the newly formed team of Two Point Studios couldn't be better versed in its intricacies and challenges with titles like *Theme Hospital*, *Black & White* and *Populous* on their collective CV. So, we wondered, having been dragged away from the monitor, what's the secret to that engrossing, time-vacuum gameplay?

"There's no magic. It's just experience," insists Hymers. "The team's pretty experienced so we've all done this kind of thing before and it's just bringing all of that stuff to bear."

"I think it's a case of layering on the experiences. As you place something down, another challenge happens, and I think it's almost like brewing," adds Smart. And as we begin to explore the process of how *Two Point Hospital* was constructed, that brewing analogy starts to make a lot of sense as balance between accessibility and depth of systems becomes the focus.

"It should be accessible first," Smart continues. "And how hard the game gets and how much you drill into it is kind of your choice. You can look at training your staff and looking after particular patients… but it creeps up on you. The last thing we want to do is throw people in at the deep end. We want it to be accessible and then we want to give people the confidence to go in and interrogate all of the sub menus and realise that there's quite a level of strategy underneath. That's what we're kind of steering people towards."

This was certainly our experience playing the game. As we began our journey through Two Point County, tackling each hospital challenge in turn and gradually being introduced to new illnesses and obstacles along the way, the intricacy and potential complexity of the game remained in view just beneath the surface. Each facility in the county gradually ramps up the number of balls you need to keep in the air, but you can deep dive into the mechanics and customisation pretty quickly if you choose to.

"We're doing some friends and family playtests at the moment and that's all people who don't traditionally play a lot of games," reveals Hymers. "And maybe it's just because they're friends and family and they're just being kind, but they seem to be getting on with it. We've told them to be brutal. But for people who want the depths, like myself – I usually play games and I'll try and optimise the heck out of the hospital – there are all of these advanced systems in there for people like that."

The game introduces these gradually though, such as the importance of having enough seating in the hospital for waiting patients, having staff members with specialised training for certain jobs, building different wards and facilities to treat specific ailments. It's all carefully managed and fed to you as things begin, but it all starts to layer on top of one another to the point that you'll be concerned about having magazine racks, vending machines and even air conditioners or radiators in the right places.

> "I THINK THE CLOSEST WE GET TO A PROPER ILLNESS IS HURTY LEG, WHICH IS ALMOST LIKE SOMEBODY IN PLASTER"
> MARK SMART, ART DIRECTOR

"Temperatures start to become a mechanic in that you get research rooms that you can build super computers in to make research go faster, but super computers generate heat, so you might need air conditioning in there," Hymers adds. "And if it's a hot level anyway then you need more. That's one aspect of the simulation, among many."

One of the things that we quickly came to learn about *Two Point Hospital* is when and when not to panic about what's happening. The game establishes a really nice hierarchy of urgency, and not always in the way you would expect. For instance, we got into a bit of a panic the first time a patient died (which seems reasonable under the circumstances), »

but then they turned into a ghost and everyone seemed pretty cool about that, a janitor finally dealing with the issue with a handheld vacuum cleaner. Then again, an epidemic of clowns walking into reception was far more worrisome.

"We should have taken the edge off of that. We didn't really consider all of the people who are scared of clowns," Hymers jokes. But it speaks to the sensibilities of the game. This is a sim with a lot of grounded roots, but it definitely doesn't take itself too seriously.

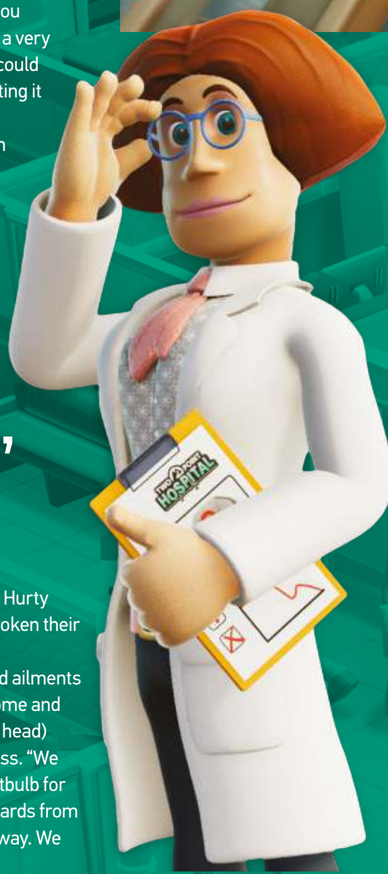
"Hospitals, by their very nature, are not places that you particularly want to visit," Smart admits. "It's not actually a very fun subject. When you initially say it's a hospital game, it could be quite a dry, very clinical thing and not that fun, but coating it with this humour makes a difference."

And so the balancing of subject matter and approach begins, as the structures and principles of *Two Point Hospital* are based in real concepts that we can get our heads around while the illnesses and ailments of the patients are lighter and often quite ludicrous, softening their impact and giving the experience that all-important fun factor. "I think the closest we get to a proper illness is Hurty Leg, which is almost like somebody in plaster. They've broken their leg, but that's it," Smart explains.

"WRANGLING THE GAME INTO SOME KIND OF SENSIBLE STATE IS HARD"

BEN HYMERS, TECHNICAL DIRECTOR AND CO-FOUNDER

Which does raise the question of how all of these odd ailments were concocted in the first place. From Mock Star syndrome and Cubism to Pandemic (literally having a pan stuck on your head) and Light Headedness, it sounds like a fun creative process. "We just sat in a room and we said 'I want a person with a lightbulb for a head'," Smart reveals. "And then we would work backwards from that. Or we just had a terrible pun and we worked in that way. We approached it from different angles."





Some locations are set in the heart of cities and as a result can be pretty spread out around an area. This will likely create interesting issue in terms of patient waiting times if the facilities they require are far apart.

"They can evolve after chatting with everyone a bit," adds Hymers. "A lot of the time there will be ridiculously technically difficult to do ideas, but then each person will feed into it a little bit."

"Initially it's just a couple of us in a room saying, 'Wouldn't it be funny if…' and trying to work it from there," says Smart. "Or I've just thought of a great name for a particular ailment."

"We're mostly dads, so we do mostly dad jokes," Hymers summarises rather nicely.

The realistic elements though are part of where a lot of the depth of the staffing side of the game can be found. Doctors, nurses and custodial staff all have an array of skills they can specialise in, all of which will feel very familiar. Doctors may have particularly good diagnosis skills or be trained psychologists, while nurses might work best on wards and have good bed-side manner. Janitors may have a mechanics skill that means they can repair broken hospital equipment – an essential ability deeper into the game as they run down over time – and can catch ghosts. That last one isn't very realistic, but it's perhaps one of only a few exceptions to the rule. And it's through fine-tuning your hospital with these staff and placing them in the right roles that you can find a deeper control over your simulation.

"There are levels of efficiency," Smart tells us. "One person might be really good at being a GP and you put them in there and they will turnover the queue of people outside quicker."

"If you're into that level of play you can make sure you have a staff member trained up really well in all of the GP skills, but not so good on surgery and what not, and you can restrict them so that they only work in the GP's office," adds Hymers. "If you want to micromanage your staff to that level, you can do that."

It was in the teaching hospital level that this really came to the fore, as we could no longer hire trained physicians or other staff »

SIMS IN RECOVERY

WE'VE SEEN SOME FANTASTIC NEW TAKES ON CLASSIC SIMULATION CONCEPTS IN RECENT YEARS



STARDEW VALLEY

This charming farming sim picked up the baton from Harvest Moon and brought some even deeper systems to the experience, as well as some additional flair to the pixel-art design. It's proven to be a wonderfully adaptable experience playing just as nicely on PC as it does on Switch. It's the sim that can travel anywhere.



PLANET COASTER

Frontier Developments, one of the great veterans of simulation design from years making *RollerCoaster Tycoon* among others, has pretty much had the last word on theme-park building with its 2016 release. This gigantic and highly customisable game strikes the balance between player creativity and management challenge.



RIMWORLD

This wonderfully deep management sim is still in Early Access at the moment but is already hugely popular, and with good reason. The depth of personality the game boasts, with each settler expressing their own character and ability to be hurt on any part of their body, challenge of surviving, expanding and thriving on an alien world is excellent.



CITIES: SKYLINES

Colossal Order stepped into the gap left behind by Sim City as fans rejected EA's most recent attempt to extend the series. *Cities: Skylines* offered us all the benefits of the metropolis simulation along with a swathe of features (modding being a big one) that you couldn't get elsewhere. To this day it keeps being expanded upon.



FROSTPUNK

Pitching itself as the first society-survival game, 11 Bit Studios' excellent take on the sim is one of our favourites in recent memory. The pressures of working on a city sim within a post-apocalyptic setting really amp up the experience and the way this gets expressed through the tools you have and how people behave is constructed beautifully.



PRISON ARCHITECT

Not to be confused with *The Escapists* (not that we ever did that), *Prison Architect* is about keeping the inmates within the walls of your facility, not letting them out. You need to manage the structure and facilities of your penitentiary, hire staff to manage it and unlock new features. Above all else, you need to manage the inmates, of course.

TWO POINT HOSPITAL





The outer walls of your hospital in each level are fixed, but how you choose to place rooms within that structure is your choice. They will each have a minimum dimension to hit, but beyond that it's up to you.

The golden toilet is a special bonus item for Two Point fans who have signed up to the newsletter. As far as we know it's no different from any of the other toilets in the game, but we could be wrong.



The medical equipment employed to cure specific maladies will often reflect the nature of the ailment itself, such as a small circus tent to cure clowns of their particular troubles.









Once you get deeper into staff and patient management you can begin looking for personality traits to cater to, like a doctor who gets 'hangry'. Might be a good idea to place a vending machine in her office.

There are a ton of what appear at first to be cosmetic items in the game, but many can become very important later on as their uses come into play. An arcade machine, for instance, can be vital for lifting the boredom of long waits.



Every room you build is furnished with specific items that need to be placed first and foremost, but from there you can place what you like to decorate. The more you add the more prestige your hospital gets, but it all costs money, so be careful.



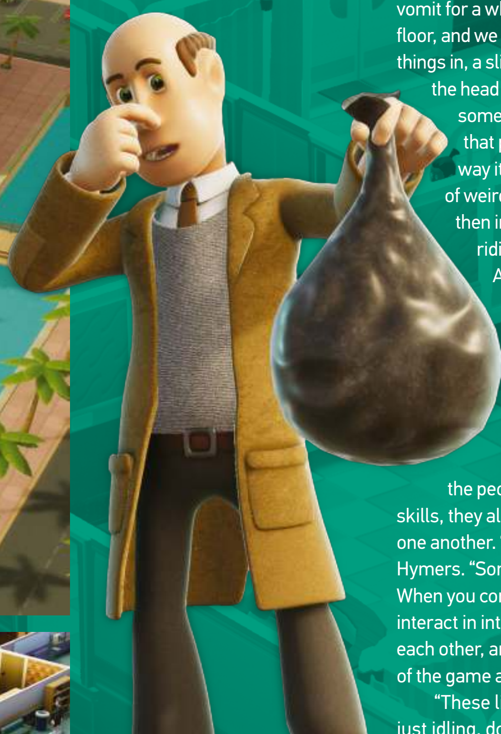


"IT'S JUST KIND OF BEAUTIFUL. WE SOUND ALL SOPPY ABOUT OUR OWN GAME NOW"
BEN HYMERS, TECHNICAL DIRECTOR AND CO-FOUNDER

and could only hire in trainees who would then need to be taught. As those staff were training they were taken out of rotation, leading to a build-up of patients and increased pressure on the facility. Everything begins to layer on top of everything else and suddenly 30 minutes has become three hours and you're being called into an interview. Or rather we were.

But layering all of these systems has its side effects, which is why testing becomes so important. "Ben Hoskins, our lead designer, has got a heck of a job," Hymers confides. "His last couple of months have been trying to balance it all and make it all make sense. Because, as you say, all of these things affecting all the other things can throw things up that are out of our control. Wrangling the game into some kind of sensible state is hard."

We asked if this had thrown up anything amusing as new ideas were dropped in and tested out. It turns out that 'thrown up' was an apt choice of phrase. "So, people have been able to vomit for a while and urinate, leaving patches of the stuff on the floor, and we put in, just for fun because people like to sneak silly things in, a slipping-up animation," Hymers begins. "Chris [Knott] the head of animation did an animation for slipping up and someone thought, 'let's hook that up and just make sure that people slip up on this every now and then'. But the way it was done was very early and it kind of made a couple of weird things happen. It would make people throw up and then immediately slip up on their own vomit, which looks ridiculous [makes hurggh, whah! sounds to illustrate]. And under the hood, the way it was done was like the interaction that would mean people would queue up for vending machines and things like that, so they would also queue up to slip on the vomit [laughs]. So you would get someone throwing up and a little queue would form next to it, which is just bizarre. So, we get stuff like that. Nobody expected that."



And some of this apparently extends to the way the people interact too. As well as staff having specialised skills, they also have personality traits, and these interact with one another. "The trait stuff is just personality things," explains Hymers. "Some of those create quite interesting behaviours. When you combine two people who have different traits they interact in interesting ways and they can affect the hospital and each other, and that's another thing that feeds into the emergence of the game and is hopefully quite compelling and interesting."

"These little people have got personality, so they're not just idling, doing nothing, just breathing, seeing the chest move out a bit," adds Smart. "They're more than that. One of the ones I noticed the other day was a nurse in the nurse station in the ward and at one point she started looking under the keyboard. She had obviously gotten a bit bored, looking under this keyboard, and it's little things like that, layering on these details, that gives it personality."

"And that's the kind of stuff that we're doing at this stage of development," Hymers concludes. "We've got two fantastic animators who have done everything that's needed for the game and now it's just the things that are cool. Now they're hooking in all these little variance things. If you focus in on the game and just watch one person and everything they do, that can be quite good. We're always spotting new things that have been slipped in there. And the fidelity of the animation is great. It's just kind of beautiful. We sound all soppy about our own game now [laughs]."

There's so much life and movement to *Two Point Hospital* once you have a full quota of staff and patients filing through, it can be mesmerising to watch, which is part of how it sucks you in and makes you lose track of time. Some of the illnesses have their own effects on movement, making people dance around or walk like an Egyptian mummy from a silent horror movie. And given that the design of your hospital is entirely up to you, from room size to items in the corridors that you create around them, these characters need to be able to navigate emergent areas instantly and know their way around from one department to another as they seek treatment. It was a small element, but the fact that queues form and characters jostle down narrow corridors was very impressive to us.

"That's been one of the hard things," admits Hymers. "*Theme Hospital* and most Theme games and sim games are on a grid. Back in the day it would be a grid and everything is made of sprites, which is interesting because sprites have no thickness and so the walls in *Theme Hospital*, they don't occupy any space. People don't collide with the walls because they're just drawn in front of the walls, if you get what I mean. Now everything is 3D and you can move the camera to look and see if people are intersecting with the walls, so that threw up all of these questions of how thick do we make walls and how wide do we make a cell that you build on? That was one of the chats that we had really early on. And the navigation, people avoiding each other. I'm a programmer and that's one of my things; pathfinding and navigation. People getting to where they want to go, people avoiding each other. And now that it's all 3D land, if you don't want people just walking straight through each other you have to programme them to avoid each other, and that's tricky when you have corridors of a certain width and walls of a certain width and you can place benches down the corridor. You actually end up with a tiny amount of space."

But, as we say, it's handled very nicely and yet still places the challenge at your feet to make an efficient and comfortable environment for your patients and staff as possible. Sometimes getting the best out of your team means replacing staff, of course, and in doing this with one nurse who kept having patients die on him, the dry wit of the writing came to the fore as the board first questioned our decision and then looked at his records to see why we might want to. His 100 percent death record did the trick.

"That was something in *Theme Hospital* that I loved," says Hymers. "Even the simpler illnesses, they didn't look any different, but you'd stop and read the little description."

"We decided that we're going along this course and we hope it translates well, but with anything like this, you've got to stick to your rules, otherwise it becomes diluted," Smart adds.

"By doing that we've made it quite coherent humour hopefully," Hymers wraps up. "Because that's what you want from your humour; coherency [laughs]."



WHY A HOSPITAL GAME?

WE ASKED TWO POINT, WHY THIS SIM FIRST?

Two Point Studios is blessed with some veteran developers from Lionhead, Bullfrog and more who have made games like *Populous*, *Theme Park*, *The Movies* and, of course, *Theme Hospital*. But we wondered why this setting for its first game as a new studio?

"It felt right," Mark Smart, Two Point art director, tells us. "I think there's a lot of love for *Theme Hospital*, but *Two Point Hospital* is a completely new game. People can see characteristics of what's gone before. We couldn't help but do that because we've got so many people who worked on the original. It's always going to be a little in the DNA of company."

"Also there's a nostalgia aspect and people have been crying out for some kind of successor for years," adds Ben Hymers, Two Point co-founder and technical director. "And weirdly it's not one that's been revisited well. There have been a couple of games that have sort of tried."

"We did some initial research and saw that there had been lots of games that kind of had a crack at it," Smart continues. "A lot of them were a little bit more freemium, mobile titles. Nobody had really tried to tackle it. Our whole ethos of setting with Two Point County is that at some point we would like to make other things set there."

A MODERN RETELLING: BARD'S TALE IV

A BELOVED RPG SERIES IS BEING GIVEN A SECOND SHOT AT GLORY. **GAMES™** SPEAKS TO CREATIVE DIRECTOR **DAVID ROGERS** ABOUT HOW INXILE ENTERTAINMENT IS MODERNISING A RETRO CLASSIC

Exactly three decades have past since the last true Bard's Tale game was released. In 1988 the internet hadn't yet truly made its way into homes, we still listened to tapes and PDAs were the hot gadget rather than whatever model of iPhone we're up to. Margaret Thatcher was still prime minister, Ronald Reagan was the US president and the Soviet Union was still hanging on. Yugoslavia was still a country, Czechoslovakia was one nation and East and West Germany had yet to be reunited. No one knew of Dolly the sheep, the euro currency didn't exist, there was no International Space Station and 9/11 was just a day in September. For gamers, 1988 saw Sega release the Mega Drive in Japan, *Out Run* won game of the year at the Golden Joystick Awards and Nintendo was only up to its third Super Mario Bros. game.

The world has changed a lot over these last three decades, and that's the challenge facing inXile Entertainment as it puts together a sequel to bridge the canyon between the Apple II to modern computing hardware. "It's like the difference between reading a book and watching a movie," says David Rogers, creative director on *The Bard's Tale IV*, of the difficulties of creating a game for a franchise having been in so long a slumber. "When you read a book you project so much of your imagination into that book because there's so much detail to fill in. It's challenging because one thing I've found is that you can ask ten original *Bard's Tale* fans what they think the game is and you'll get ten different answers. They projected so much of their imagination onto the game; the less there is on screen, the more vivid the memory."

That's a pertinent thought to have when considering the high-fidelity

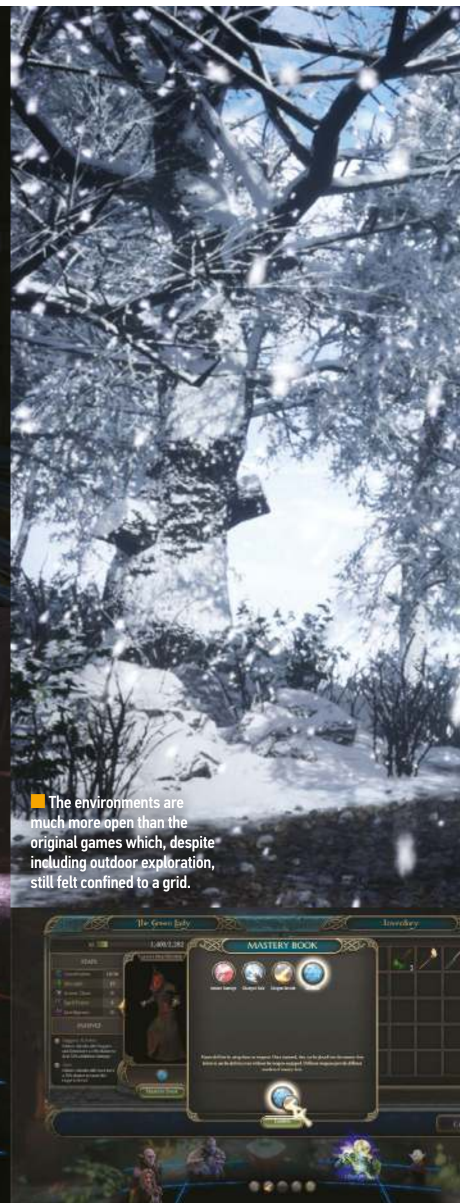


"THERE IS NO ONE RIGHT ANSWER AS TO WHAT THE CORRECT TONE OR AESTHETIC OF THE BARD'S TALE GAMES ARE"

visuals of the upcoming dungeon crawler. Three decades ago the limitations of the hardware meant that the only visual representation of Skara Brae, the place where the original game was set, was little more than a series of basic, pixelated houses and sparse dungeon environments confined to a tiny corner of the screen – the rest being text. Truthfully, there's no need for an imagination while playing games anymore, and while there's an argument that something has been lost in this the particulars of approaching game development with this in mind is a huge task to face.

"It's kind of like doing a movie adaptation of a book," adds Rogers, "because a lot of people have different mind's eye images of what Skara Brae looks like, what the Bard's Tale world is, aesthetically, tonally. I've talked to two different types of people, some thought it was a funny, lighthearted game and some people thought it was brutal and grim and that's because they were projecting their own personality a little bit onto their experience. It has definitely been a challenge because there is no one right answer as to what is the correct tone, what is the correct aesthetic of the Bard's Tale games."

A successful Kickstarter in 2015 gave the title its start, a final total of $1.5 million at a time when the excitement surrounding crowdfunding had begun to wane and there weren't quite as many guarantees when it came to projects getting funded. This proved there was interest in seeing the franchise reborn, and *The Bard's Tale IV* has been in development ever since. But with so much time passing between the previous game and this new, modern retelling, the first task must've been to figure out how to deftly transition from one archaic style of RPG to something more suitable for a modern »



The environments are much more open than the original games which, despite including outdoor exploration, still felt confined to a grid.

For many fans, being able to see Skara Brae brought to life will be thrilling. For others it may not quite match their high expectations.

era. In looking for what defined the original Bard's Tale games, Rogers says it was important to pick out the "deep-rooted concepts" that drew fans to the series in the first place. "Those pillars are the things that people are truly attached to, and then there are the game mechanics that express those pillars," he explains, "and I think you have to kind of separate those two. I played through the original Bard's Tales to try to understand what were the things that would've drawn you to the game at the time, because it wasn't *specifically* how you generated your characters, it wasn't *specifically* how you attack an enemy, but there were some deeper concepts."

For Rogers and the team at inXile, the idea was to capture the spirit of The Bard's Tale and not necessarily replicate it like for like. This meant there was a big focus on modernising, and when it comes to updating a brand across a gap as wide as 30 years there are certain things that needed to be considered. "We definitely designed this game as if it was *The Bard's Tale XIV*," says Rogers of the inventive thought process behind the game's development, "because what we're doing isn't just one iterative step off of *Bard's Tale III*. That would have been maybe just some more combat mechanics, maybe the window in the top left gets to stretch across the whole top of the screen, that would've been a big iterative step. So we're definitely pretending like we've been building Bard's Tale games for the last 30 years; where would we have arrived at if we had been doing that this entire time with a release every two years?"

This enables an extrapolation in inXile, a sort of freedom to explore where the series should be and to dilute the franchise down into its core elements as well as visualise instead its strengths as a whole.

"EVEN THE ANGER JUST COMES FROM PASSION; I'M PRETTY SEASONED AT THIS POINT, I CAN READ YOUTUBE COMMENTS WITHOUT FLINCHING"

This modernisation means approaching RPG gameplay in a manner that doesn't feel out of place in the current climate. This is something that the company has done already with its *Wasteland 2* and *Torment: Tides Of Numenera* games, both of which leveraged a very specific type of retro gameplay but were presented in a modern and suitable engine - so inXile already knows about making old-school systems feel relevant. One such example of this is how it tackled the change in character progression from the originals, which was an admittedly awkward system of menus and unexplained details. "If you had a conjuror in the original *Bard's Tale* game," recalls Rogers, "you would have a choice to ask yourself: 'Am I going to go into a magician, or a sorcerer, or a wizard?'" There are all these different branches and you're having to make these hard choices about how you want to take that character." The difference with the new game, he explains, is to replicate that with something that would feel more familiar. "We took some of those concepts and just planted it into the skill tree; your journey should feel kind of similar, but a new interface to deal with it." Rogers reminds us that the original games predate many of the most integral games of the genre, and as such there was still a lot that needed to be learnt at the time of game design





Dungeon delving will naturally be a large part of the game. The emphasis is on making them feel hostile but still have things to solve and think about inside.



A great deal of effort has been spent on making a world that can be navigated tied to a grid – like the originals – but that doesn't look like it's made of bricks.

and development. "*World Of Warcraft* was one of the first ones where I was like, 'Holy shit! They've taken a warrior and he feels as complex as the wizard,'" explains Rogers, "and I think that was one of the first times that an RPG took, for example, a warrior class that seriously, because the one before that – I distinctly remember – was *EverQuest*, and in that you could attack and you could block and you could talk, and you could do those three things up to level 70."

He laughs at the idea, but *The Bard's Tale* suffered from a very similar restriction – one that needed to be corrected. "The magic users in the original *Bard's Tale* had some of the richest character progression and so we wanted to take that same concept, that same journey towards master wizard or something, and move them over to the other classes. Warriors in the original *Bard's Tale* weren't nearly as rich when it came to customisation options as the magicians were, and so we took that really juicy 'bit' and tried to extend it to every other class so that they all feel as rich and as deep."

There's an extra element to that *World Of Warcraft* reference that perhaps has a bigger impact on the design of *The Bard's Tale IV*, too, whether knowingly or not. Rogers admits that while it's important to both modernise the game *and* appeal to its retro audience, it's also imperative to bring in new gamers that don't have that same nostalgic attachment. A fantastic recreation of a retro game would still only appeal to a very specific, niche audience after all, the same audience that has already put its money down on the idea. "When we did the Kickstarter we said, 'Here's the vision, here's the direction, here's what we want to do, who wants to sign up to buy it now, who agrees with this vision and actually wants to see this game made?' And a bunch of people put their money where their mouth is and they said, 'Yes, I do, I want to see this game get made.'" Rogers recognises that it's not as simple as that, however. "There are sort of two camps of people," he explains, "and it's really hard to try and appease all of them. I mentioned that *Bard's Tale XIV* analogy, well there are definitely people who wish we were building a *Bard's Tale IV* in the scope of that analogy. And there are people who are happy that we are building *Bard's Tale XIV*. Some people do truly want another *Bard's Tale III*, that box in the top left corner, your combat scroll and they don't want us to stray too far from that."

This is a problem with any project that is founded so heavily on the past with very little modern context to base it on - and let's face it, many Kickstarters face this issue simply because so many of them wear their rose-tinted spectacles like a shield. For inXile it's »

THE FIRST VERSE

THE **BARD'S TALE IV'S** CREATIVE DIRECTOR REVEALS WHAT HE FELT ARE THE DEEP-ROOTED CONCEPTS OF THE ORIGINALS THAT HELPED FORM THE BASIS FOR THE NEW GAME.



PARTY THEORYCRAFTING

"It's not just combat but it's anticipation of the next combat. With the original Bard's Tales games that was a huge part of it, having all this gear to distribute, spells to pick, who to set on attack or defense. Really deep party customisation and combat iteration was one of those pillars; one of the reasons you would've got really addicted to the original games was that you loved theory-crafting your party."

TURN-BASED COMBAT

"I've been playing Warhammer and Magic The Gathering since I was eight years old, and the moment you make something real-time it changes something. You can have the same mechanics, but once there's a time pressure it stops it from being something that you can really ponder, take your time with and wonder what the best way to go about it is to feel like a strategic genius."

CONTEXTUAL STORYTELLING

"When it comes to dungeon crawling and secrets, that was another one: Bard's Tale very much told its story in context. There wasn't some long scrolling intro, big opening monologues or anything. Everything was gotten in context of the world. As you're in the world you're talking to certain characters, getting snippets of the story, seeing the story for yourself."

DUNGEON PUZZLES

"The dungeons are just filled with traps and riddles and puzzles, cognitive elements that just make you feel clever, hopefully. If we want to feel like a Bard's Tale game then we need to have lots of exploration, riddles, puzzles, traps and just things that make the dungeon feel hostile but interactive and lots of little side secrets."

THIS IS SKARA

TECHNOLOGY IS PERHAPS THE BIGGEST SHIFT OVER THREE DECADES, AND IN WHAT WAYS HAS THIS HELPED THE TRANSITION FROM RETRO TO MODERN?



The last Bard's Tale game was released on the Apple II and the C64 initially, the former of which had 48KB of memory and was capable of – at most – 280 pixels in width. That's a world away from the gigabytes of data that modern PC infrastructure can push around. So in what ways has this new technology benefit *The Bard's Tale IV*? "The fact that the whole game can be fully voiced and have full face effects implementation just really makes it feel that much richer," says creative director David Rogers. "Not everyone is super into lore. If you play a lore-based game that has no full voiceover, people who are only kind of marginally into the background will skip past all the text, because they don't want to read as much as everyone would like to believe we all do. Having this full implementation really makes it come alive and makes you feel happy to take in all of this non-essential stuff that just builds up the world."

Rogers adds that "the game looks gorgeous", and he's not wrong, but he's keen to stress the effort that this requires; it's not all a benefit of modern hardware and software. "Genuinely, I don't think people appreciate that there are, depending on what time you ask us, 30 or fewer people working on this whole game," says Rogers. "But that lets us be scrappy," he adds, explaining that they look for ways to streamline development, such as by taking and altering perfectly serviceable assets already created to make it suitable for the style and tone of the game. "We can't be lazy. There's a lot of brute-force things that we can't do because we can't afford to, so there's a lot of little scrappy things we do to be a small studio but play with the big dogs."

about "recapturing that magic", but at the same time making it something that a wider audience can enjoy, appreciate and – hopefully – attach new, modern meaning and respect to. "We know that to build a game that is going to lead onto a *Bard's Tale V* or *VI*, we need it to take the direction that we're doing which – most of all – is to make it accessible," says Rogers. "I'm a very avid gamer, but when I sat down to play *Bard's Tale I, II* and *III*… you *have* to read the manual, there's a steep learning curve. And one of the biggest things is that we wanted people to be able to – with no priming, no prepping – just sit down and you're in the world and the game teaches you how to play, it eases you in at the right rate. We're not throwing you into having six characters, right at the start before you know how the game is played. And I think there are some people who are such avid *Bard's Tale* fans that accessibility is a problem."

In a culture that chastises gamers who play on easy, that considers mobile games to be for 'casuals' and champions tough experiences like *Dark Souls*, it's perhaps easy to see how the word "accessible" has become such a dirty term, synonymous as it is with 'easy'. "We're trying to build it for an entire audience," stresses Rogers, "not exclusively for old-school people, though those people we listen to very clearly because it's super-important to us that people recognise this as a true sequel to the Bard's Tale." Once you understand this design aspect, it's quite easy to spot in the beta itself, too. Unlike the previous game there's no expectation that you understand how the RPG mechanics work and, therefore, how best to build a six-person party from the get-go; you're eased into it, given time to form a party. And while it is indeed a good-looking game, that fidelity enables a depth and variety to the interaction in the world that was an important and novel aspect of the original games, yet completely restricted by the hardware of the time. New concepts like the luck stones – essentially consumable save points scattered throughout the world – are a smart design aspect that give the player the choice to save at the stone or consume it for a bonus to experience; it's a fine balance between overstepping the difficulty that came with the original's restricted save system and enabling those retro fans who still want to experience the game as it once was.

Now that the beta is out there, however, a new challenge has reared its head for inXile. Now it's a case of going through the feedback and finding out what is working, what needs changing and what needs tweaking to retain the project's vision but enable a greater appreciation. "It's coming from all directions," explains Rogers, "it's

The combat has been updated to make it more understandable than the scroll of text that the original games suffered from.

■ In a bid to modernise the progression system, *The Bard's Tale IV* utilises a skill tree to better specialise and give even warrior classes something to work towards.

■ The new look of the combat system is, functionally, similar to the previous games, but the visualisation of it makes it look akin to a tactics-style game.

coming from YouTube comments, I'm watching players on Twitch stream it and watching the things that they're running into. There's been a ton of previews and reviews and stuff. And the response has been, generally, pretty positive. People are playing it, people are playing it a second time or even multiple times."

While Rogers admits that some of the feedback has been angry – though he terms it "passionate" – he and the team have been happy with the way the beta is being received. In keeping with the modernisation of *The Bard's Tale IV*, it's also interesting to hear of the feedback inXile is collecting from Twitch streams, seemingly a new, modern way of QA testing a game with real, honest feedback. "It's *huge*," says Rogers of the feedback that can be garnered from Twitch. "It's a hassle for us to go find someone at a local college or something, and then bring them in. But the other day Bikeman was on Twitch and he played the game for five straight hours. And he was loving it, but I saw there was a bug with some quest waypoints that was confusing him, he didn't quite understand what the game mechanics were, he didn't understand how drinking worked, so that was clear that we weren't communicating the drunkenness system properly."

"MY MEASURE OF SUCCESS IS THAT MOST PEOPLE SAY, 'I HAD FUN PLAYING THE GAME'"

Rogers adds that it's "an amazing form of user testing", since the developer can see the game being played *and* get feedback as it's being tested. "The streamer is constantly talking about his experience," he says. "And so all of those high points and low points they call out for you. And then there's the scrawl on the side, which is just everyone noticing all the peripheral elements."

While there isn't too much time until *The Bard's Tale IV*'s release date of 18 September 2018, from our own experiences, in speaking with Rogers and noticing the generally high praise that the beta has been receiving from gamers and streamers, it seems as though the hard part has already been done. "From here on until release we're obviously going to be iterating," says Rogers, "and paying attention to the feedback, though every outlet of feedback has a different slant." It might have managed to handle the 30-year gap from *III* to *IV*, but inXile still has the pressure of three decades of nostalgia to live up to. "There's a huge responsibility," says Rogers. "We get forum posts, saying, 'Dude, I played this game with my dad, it's a super-fond memory.' We're not making some fluffy casino game or something, people have emotional attachment to the series." Yet as much as inXile seems to be blending the retro with the modern well, its measurement of success isn't solely the amount of copies sold anymore, now it must appeal to both a retro and a modern crowd, appease its 34,000 Kickstarter backers, but also create a product that could lead to the rebirth of a franchise. This responsibility must lead to an insurmountable pressure, surely?

"I generally want to just make a game that I want to play myself," says Rogers. "And then I hope that there's enough of *me* out there that they'll all agree. I don't know how to measure the success of a game. My measure of success is that most people say, 'I had fun playing the game', that's the best I can do. I'm just trying to make something fun."



WARFACE

IN THE CRO

HOW WARFACE IS TRYING TO NAVIGATE THE WARZONE OF FREE-TO-PLAY SHOOTERS TO CONQUER CONSOLES

Allods Team and Mail.ru are walking into one of the most hotly contested warzones between gamers and game-makers around today. The crux of the contention is on how free-to-play gaming can best be managed, leveraged and experienced so that game-makers and publishers can make the money needed to keep moving forward, while also allowing players an experience that doesn't feel like they're being squeezed for cash. It's about innovative ways of delivering games to players in a crowded marketplace where our money doesn't stretch far enough to allow us access to everything. It's about gamers who want to feel like their skills in the game mean that they can be competitive even if they don't spend a penny. It's about fairness. It's about consumer rights. It's about entitlement. It's about profit. It's about everything that clashes when commercialism and art collide, and Warface is returning to consoles in the midst of all of it.

But Mail.ru doesn't seem too put off by all of this. In fact, when we caught up with project manager Alexander Shimov to talk about the transition of the PC version of *Warface* to PS4 and Xbox One (having picked up the free-to-play shooter from Crytek in early 2017), he seemed quite happy with how *Warface* is positioning itself in the market.

"We don't look at this as pay to win, as we're really happy that everyone can play the game without paying for it and for consoles especially, knowing that there is some… not frustration exactly, but people are afraid of monetisation, they're uncomfortable. We plan to tweak it and tune it to make sure that everything

OSSFIRE



in the game can be acquired just by playing it without crazy objectives," Shimov explains to us. And while there are items in the game that have better stats than others and can be bought with in-game currency, the currency itself is also earned through play, so it's not locked away from players who just play for free, "like as a reward for playing the game every day or something like that," adds Shimov. When we originally reviewed *Warface* on PC back in **games™** 142, we described its store infrastructure as restrained, and that looks to have remained the same, even if the rest of the game as expanded and evolved considerably.

So much of what *Warface* is was ultimately inherited from Mail.ru's purchase of the rights of the game from Crytek in early 2017. Since then its development has been passed to the publisher's in-house developer Allods Team in Moscow. This team has previously worked on *Skyforge* in collaboration with Obsidian Entertainment. It has learnt a lot from its experience with that game, which was also released for free, and adapting its features to improve on its mixed reception.

While the arguments over what constitutes good and bad free-to-play practices, what the line is between pay to win and natural player progression, rages on and might be fiercer than ever, it would be fair to say that free-to-play has never been in a better position than now. *Fortnite* is obviously the big cultural phenomenon of the moment, but *Warframe* has been doing incredibly well of late, as has *Paladins*, *Raiders*, *H1Z1* and more. The disdain with which many gamers once looked upon this release model has largely faded away, even if it's been replaced with a vigilant distrust. *Warface* seems to be taking all of the right lessons from what others have been doing, as well as the evolving face of the game in its PC incarnation and the aborted release of the game on Xbox 360 under its original developer, Crytek.

"Especially on consoles it was tough," says Shimov of the environment for free-to-play games not long ago. "What we like is that *Warface* is about co-operative and competitive play at the same time. You can play with friends, and we also think it's trending right now, this socialising part of play. People want to play together. *Warface* has a battle royale mode. It's unique, fast-paced and a bit different from *Fortnite* or *PUBG*. Also, it has the PvE content like the Special Operations content that are really cool and »



There are tons of customisation options for your different characters in the game as each class type can be given new armour and outfits to your preference. These will cost you some in-game currency though.





"WE FIRST OF ALL WANTED TO MAKE SURE THAT PVP IS COMPETITIVE BECAUSE IT'S ONE OF THE BEST FEATURES OF WARFACE"

ALEXANDER SHIMOV, PROJECT MANAGER



fun. And then there's PvP as well. So it has quite a lot to offer."

The variety of what *Warface* has to offer certainly stands it apart from the current crop of free games out there at the moment, which have tended to find some of their success through how specialised they are. It also stands it apart from the original release from Crytek, which while varied for its time has been built upon considerably since the original PC release. And, of course, there was that Xbox 360 version of the game that only lasted about nine months before being pulled from the store. That left Allods Team with the tricky task of converting the PC build of the game to console from scratch and without the kind of inherent understanding of the engine that Crytek would have enjoyed first time around.

"There were two most difficult parts," Shimov told us as we discussed the challenge of inheriting a PC game and converting it for console play. "The first was the way you look around and the motion components when you need to make the camera controls feel right. How you look around, how you move around a level. There are a lot of different parameters, and we looked into a lot of consoles that have the gamepad. Every game actually kind of had similar controls, albeit in their own way. They have something in common. There's the snapping, there's some slowing down or some following function for the cursor, but every game makes it a bit different in terms of tuning.

"Then the aim assist, that was really a tricky thing to do. We have PvE and PvP, and we first of all wanted to make sure that PvP is competitive, because it's one of the best features of *Warface*. Some games switch aim assist completely off in PvP, but we decided to leave it on. We've made it much looser than in PvE though. It still helps you a little bit, but just a little bit."

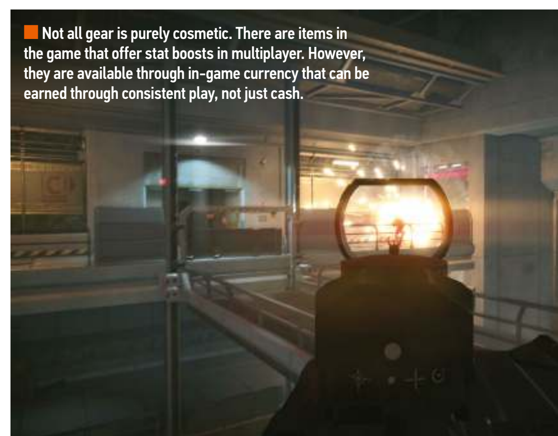
From our extended hands-on time with the game, we would say that Allods Team has done an excellent job of managing that transition. The gamepad layout is very intuitive, the controls feel sharp and responsive, and the snapping of bringing up the iron sights feels very familiar. There's a tightness to the overall feel of the game, especially in PvP from our experience, that is very reminiscent of classic Call Of Duty gameplay. The game has heft in its weapons and weight in its movement, but not so much to make the experience plodding, and it doesn't feel the need to augment that with speed boost armour or parkour traversal. It almost feels like a bit of a throwback, but a welcome one. Of course, much of that was there already.

"Talking about the gameplay itself, it really fits in very well with consoles," Shimov enthuses. "Basically, we left everything intact that was in the PC version, and it really felt just right after we played a lot on consoles, how we implemented the control scheme for gamepad support. It really felt good for the team, and we got very good feedback from the players who we invited for internal playtests."

So in some ways that has helped the transition, but that still left a series of technical challenges to overcome as well. "*Warface* was released four years ago, and it runs on CryEngine 3 with some enhancements because Crytek did a very good job of making it graphically very beautiful," explains Shimov. "But we needed to introduce PlayStation 4 and Xbox »



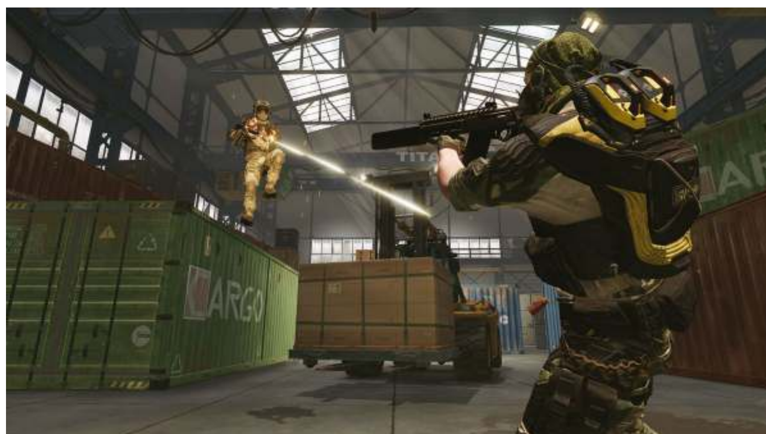
Not all gear is purely cosmetic. There are items in the game that offer stat boosts in multiplayer. However, they are available through in-game currency that can be earned through consistent play, not just cash.





Some of the Crytek heritage can still be seen in some of the armour design in the game, but Mail.ru appears to be making *Warface* its own with each passing update and new feature.







WARFACE ROYALE

HOW ALLODS TEAM IS TAKING ON THE POPULAR GENRE

In among the array of PvE and PvP game modes that *Warface* offers, you will see that a battle royale mode has been included in the mix. This is a relatively new addition, and a bit different from what you'll experience elsewhere. For a start, *Warface* is solely first-person, and that makes a big difference to the feel of the experience. Then, there's the number of players, which is 32 rather than the traditional 100.

What this means is that battles last for an average of five to seven minutes, according to the development team, with everyone landing in the game with melee weapons only, after which they must loot around for weapons and then attempt to take out the other 31 players on the map. There are more than 70 different weapons that can spawn in the game, so the variety of armaments is extensive, but your ammo won't be. Each gun will only hold one clip, so resource management is essential. How you time your engagement and how accurate you can be is vitally important.





The classic baseball slide move (achieved by crouching out of a dash) is very effective for getting the drop on another player at close quarters. It's also a must-do move for entering elevators.



"WHAT WE LIKE IS THAT WARFACE IS ABOUT CO-OPERATIVE AND COMPETITIVE PLAY AT THE SAME TIME"

ALEXANDER SHIMOV, PROJECT MANAGER



SPECIAL OPERATIONS

THE CO-OP MODE THAT HAS LEGS FOR WARFACE

Warface has two different co-op styles that you can take a crack at. The regular co-op missions vary in style, but are either a Traverse, Seek And Destroy, Arena, Safari or Escort styles. Special Operations are a little more involved, offering something more like a raid style of gameplay. They last a little longer, have multiple locations, boss battles, unique locations for the game and a running narrative that gives you some insight into the background story of *Warface*. Ammo is easily depleted in this mode, as is health, so you'll need a balanced squad of class types to make sure you have someone keeping ammo stocked and a medic to revive the team. Even in easier difficulties, you can fall apart if your squad isn't made up correctly and on hard you will be lucky to survive just a few stages of the game.



Multiplayer in *Warface* feels a lot like classic FPS gaming of the last generation, which is no knock on our part. We like how stripped down the experience is, relying on shooting skill and accuracy over familiarity with any unique tricks or moves.



While many of the co-op levels are quite linear in their construction, there are often some branching paths that will offer different vantage points – particularly handy for the sniper in your squad.

One support that wasn't possible with this version of CryEngine. Our engineers are very talented, and we have a really talented team, and we really liked the game, which helped us to make it through."

And then there are the smaller details that needed to be addressed in some fashion, such as UI, which can often translate poorly from PC to consoles as a up-close monitor setup is replaced with a more distanced living room arrangement. Allods Team has its own challenges with this as well. "[The UI] is always a pain, especially if the game was developed only for PC at first without having in mind the console version," Shimov begins. "It's just very difficult. So we decided to not build it from the ground up, because we want very smooth updates, and we want to make them simultaneously on all platforms, so if we were to rebuild the UI completely without touching the PC version it would be very difficult to achieve. But we have plans about updating some of the UI in both versions to make sure that they are good for all of the audience."

This strikes us as a sensible approach, which probably summarises how Allods Team is taking this challenge on rather nicely. As we've said, this game is launching into the cauldron of free-to-play on consoles with a lot of different ideas and arguments raging, but it appears to be navigating them well. Another example of that would be cross play, which has been a cause of consternation for PS4 players in particular. *Warface* will not be cross play for any platform, and the reasons are mostly to do with offering the fairest and most consistent player experience.

"We mostly worry about this fair play between different audiences because we have found *Warface* to be very competitive in its nature, and we think it's just unfair to mix up the control schemes that are so different. On PC you don't have aim assist, but really sometimes that works even better than PC for PvE play. It would also be unfair there. As for PvP, we actually did playtests between PC and console gamers when we implemented the aim assist, and it was sometimes even quite even between good PC players and good console players, but still PC had an advantage. We decided to make it fair, so there will be three ecosystems of Xbox, PlayStation and PC. And Xbox crossplay with PlayStation isn't possible because of Sony and Microsoft issues."

The other side of this is that Allods Team and Mail.ru want to continue to support *Warface* as a going esports concern and to offer opportunities for console players to play a part. Keeping the platforms separate seems like the best way of keeping that side of the multiplayer experience competitive and fair. "We plan to introduce and implement this PlayStation 4 tournaments feature because it fits very well with the *Warface* esport component," Shimov tells us. "In the future we want to implement an in-game tournament system that will also make it possible for Xbox players to participate in tournaments. Our long-term plan is that we would like to have LAN finals not only for PC like we already have with Warface Cups, but also for consoles. LAN finals for consoles would be amazing."

This is an exciting new chapter in the *Warface* story. It was a game that didn't really excite or offend greatly on its initial release, that failed on Xbox 360 by any estimation and that was let go by Crytek in early 2017 without too much fuss. But now, with a console relaunch about to take place and with so many gameplay options available, this could be a big free-to-play success. If you're looking for some classic FPS multiplayer and co-op gameplay that feels polished and balanced, you would be hard pressed to find much better value at the moment. 


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"It's a crazy, weird bit of technology, but also just a fun experience to play"
BEN HYMERS, TECHNICAL DIRECTOR AND CO-FOUNDER, TWO POINT STUDIOS



WHY I ...

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: FOUR SWORDS ADVENTURES

BEN HYMERS, TECHNICAL DIRECTOR AND CO-FOUNDER, TWO POINT STUDIOS

I'm going to say Four Swords *because I had some of the best times with friends playing all of the way through* Four Swords. *On the Gamecube or the Game Boy Advance, some of the best multiplayer times, everyone sneaking off into little caves, stealing gems. It was an incredible game.*

It's so different. It's a crazy, weird bit of technology, but also just a fun experience to play. I played it with a group of friends who I play a ton of multiplayer games with, and that's the one that sticks in my memory as one of the best moments. We would play it at lunchtimes at work. Good times.



Reviews



74

THE CREW 2

Has Ubisoft perfected a land, sea and air racer that can take on Forza Horizon?



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven and, of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest. We'd never let that happen, and besides, you'd smell it a mile off. Finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact. They are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists designed to enlighten, inform and engage – the gospel according to **games™**.













AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

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BIG WORLD, SMALL IDEAS

The Crew 2

For all it tries and for all of its small victories, *The Crew 2* ultimately loses its attempt to turn the United States into a vehicular playground. Certainly, it's a valiant effort and an improvement on the original, but a lack of personality, a reliance on progress-through-repetition and frustratingly implemented artificial intelligence combine to hinder what might have otherwise been a grand road trip.

Its problems are built around comfort. The degree to which developer Ivory Tower strives to make sure players feel comfortable in this digital recreation of the land of the free results in an experience that lacks any of the danger and spectacle that you'd reasonably expect when offered the chance to tear across one of the world's most diverse and interesting environments.

Handling is simplistic and too easy to master, race types lack originality, the narrative is achingly awkward in its presentation and the rewards for good performances are predictable and far from what we'd call aspirational.

This is a game in which all of the jagged edges have been shaved down to a perfectly smooth surface, presumably in the hope that what's presented will insult or harm no one. Unfortunately, that has led to an experience that could at best be described as soothing, and at worst lobotomising.

You find yourself playing simply for the lack of revelations it presents, just as you might rewatch a familiar movie specifically because you know it poses no threat to your intelligence and will simply ask nothing of your mind.

This is a shame because the building blocks for something special are present and correct and, at times, *The Crew 2* can be enjoyable. The addition of planes over and above the vehicle options in the first game, for instance, gives you the option of exploring the United States by land, sea and air. This provides plenty of potential for

THIS IS A GAME IN WHICH ALL OF THE JAGGED EDGES HAVE BEEN SHAVED DOWN TO A SMOOTH SURFACE



Right: *The Crew 2*'s in-game photo mode is excellent, giving you control over all of the usual camera settings as well as the time of day, weather and if you want to include other cars in your final image.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ivory Tower
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (1-8 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes





FAQs

Q. ROUTE 66?
Yes, a version of the famous cross-country route is included. You should allow for an hour(ish) to drive it.

Q. MOST DIFFICULT VEHICLE TYPE?
Due to their twitchy handling model, the Jetsprint boats are arguably the most difficult to control.

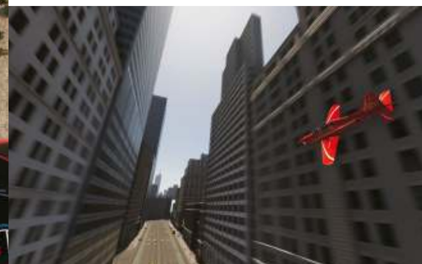
Q. A BEST LOCATION?
Highly subjective, of course, but there are few finer sights than flying just above river level through the Grand Canyon.







Below: Performing acrobatics between skyscrapers is fun for a while, but the lack of interesting tasks built into the concept is disappointing.



Above: The variety and diversity of vehicles is impressive on paper. Monster trucks, dirt bikes, rally cars, super cars, drag racers, drift racers and 4x4 trucks are all present, but the experiences available from them aren't as interesting as the length of the vehicle list.







IGNORE THE NARRATIVE

In an ill-advised move, Ivory Tower has attempted to include some semblance of a narrative within *The Crew 2*. As you hit milestones you're 'treated' to short cut-scenes that are designed to contextualise your performance and inspire you to push towards the next one.

The short of it is that the writing, directing and concepts contained within these moments are terrible and work to undermine your experience, rather than enhance it. These moments are not so regular that they dominate the entire experience, but they are far too frequent given their lack of quality.

Frankly, their inclusion smells of a decision borne out of focus testing non-gamers rather than one that originated from the minds of the design team.

At first the options seem wide-ranging and interesting and there's a lot to pick and choose from, setting up an expectation that you can focus on the events you like and ignore the rest. In such a way you can define what kind of game you want to play and see.

However, that's not really the reality of the situation. Street races, and their applicable vehicles, aren't different enough from one another to warrant you focusing your energy on mastering them over any of the other available options.

Within each vehicle type a car's top speed might change, but the handling model is too consistent across the board to entice you to want to spend time learning the intricacies of each of them. Flying a plane is nothing like a driving a car, of course, but even here you'll have gotten to grips with all of the available details within a couple of sessions in the cockpit.

The Crew 2 isn't trying to be a simulation and shouldn't be attacked for a lack of realistic handling models, but with so many vehicles to choose from it feels like a missed opportunity to have so little by way of unique personality injected into its showroom line-up. You instead find yourself focusing too much on the design of a car's chassis and its accompanying paint job to give it meaning.

If the vehicle and event options had even 20 per cent of the variety and appeal of the offered environment then this would be a game that might earn a position alongside the Forza Horizon series as an open-world racer of genuine intrigue. Instead, things have been played far too safe here for *The Crew 2* to cross the line as anything other than an opportunity lost.

You need to take risks to earn rewards and, unfortunately, *The Crew 2* fails to do this. Worse, it fails to let its players take any risks within the construct it offers them.

setting up your own creative routes across the country and, indeed, it's these self-made moments that represent the best the game has to offer.

Moving from car to plane, plane to bike and bike to boat as the terrain changes is a great way to indulge the single greatest achievement here: the landscape. With planes as an option you never have to rely on fast travelling between locations unless you're short on playing time.

You can stick to the classic Route 66 trail, or forge your own coast-to-coast path. Maybe you want to avoid the coasts altogether and navigate through the central states on a north-to-south route or circumnavigate the whole map.

The charm of moving away from the set tasks only lasts for as long as the views stay fresh and unfamiliar, though. At some point you run out of new sights to see and you need to win events in order to progress in terms of filling out your garage and moving up the leaderboard of racing fame.

It's here that opportunities start to feel missed and it's difficult not to come down hard on *The Crew 2*'s lack of interesting pre-defined events. The events are split between different disciplines, each of which acts to group together racing concepts that vaguely align with one another in terms of their tone and community.

The Pro Racing events are all about competing in the fastest boats, planes and cars the game has to offer. Freestyle focuses on style over flat-out pace, asking you to master stunt planes, monster trucks and jetsprint boats. Then there's Street Racing, featuring drag races, drift competitions and illegal contests throughout the cities, and Offroad events based largely across the map's wilds.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

REACH FOR THE SKIES: The addition of planes opens up the map enormously, allowing you to navigate at speed between distant locations without having to rely on the fast-travel option.

VERDICT 5/10
LACK OF DESIGN RISKS AND PERSONALITY SPOIL THE RIDE



OLD SCHOOL, NEW RULES

Octopath Traveler

Music has a powerful hold on human memory. A single passage from an assumed-forgotten song can put you back in a previous chapter of your life, in vivid detail. And that connection's true enough in video games. Catch a melody from JRPG all-timers like *Persona 4* and *Secret Of Mana* (the original, naturally), and you're transported back to their worlds, consumed once more by ageless interactive fantasy.

Octopath Traveler, the new Switch-exclusive JRPG from *Secret Of Mana* makers Square Enix, doesn't have a soundtrack quite as magical as those impressive precedents. Nor do the individual motivations of its cast of playable characters – eight, in case that title wasn't obvious – ever come close to the interwoven stories of *Chrono Trigger*'s time-travelling ensemble. Unlike that 1995 high watermark for 16-bit role-players, *Octopath*'s assembled companions are never combatting a single, world-threatening super-evil that requires their combined and organised efforts to defeat. Rather, they travel more by coincidence than design, only occasionally engaging in trivial one-to-one "travel banter" as they progress on their own paths.

But that *Octopath Traveler* even invites comparison to these incredible games of JRPG's past – not to mention the more recent *Bravely Default*, from which this title borrows some combat system inspiration – is illustrative of its quality, even if the final experience doesn't quite meet such heights. This is a deep and detailed adventure that will consume tens of hours, hiding all manner of secrets in plain sight, unafraid to let the player find their own way through its initially unmapped lands. In certain respects, both aesthetic and mechanical, it is so magically engineered that its shortcomings can almost be overlooked. *Almost.*

Octopath Traveler is striking from the moment the title screen blinks into life. It's presented in a mesmerising visual style that evokes not the reality of aforementioned Super Nintendo essentials, but a recollection of them flattered

DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Square Enix/ Acquire
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Below: Strolling around the game's gorgeous setting of Orsterra provides many opportunities to caress the Switch's capture button.

Below: Boss encounters demand focus. Fail to regularly break a big enemy's defence, and they'll tear through your party.



THE GAME IS STRIKING FROM THE MOMENT ITS TITLE SCREEN BLINKS INTO LIFE, PRESENTED IN A MESMERISING VISUAL STYLE

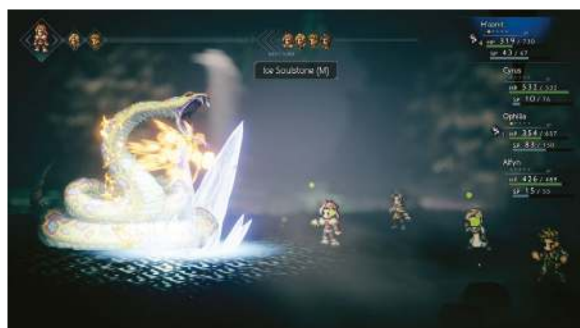


FAQs

Q: HOW MANY CHAPTERS ARE THERE?
Each of the eight characters has four chapters to play through, of escalating difficulty.

Q: DO I NEED TO FINISH ALL EIGHT?
Not if you don't want to – you can focus on just the protagonist you chose at the start.

Q: CAN I SWAP MY PROTAGONIST MID-GAME?
No. They're always going to be in your party of four, but you can change their position in your formation.





GRIND ME CRAZY

Finish any character's first chapter and you may want to bound forward to the next – but doing so will likely see your party wiped out by powerful enemies. Every new area in *Octopath Traveler* is graded with a danger rating, and if the majority of your party isn't up to the recommended level, prepare to struggle. The only sensible solution is to grind through regions you're relatively comfortable in, eliminating enemies and gaining JP (the game's experience points) to level up and press on. The money they drop helps with getting better gear, too. Thank goodness, then, that the combat here is so rewarding, otherwise between-chapter play would've been a joyless experience.

incredibly by the golden haze that gradually turns all favourites from years gone by into much more than they ever were. It's as if Square Enix has reached inside the brain of a hardcore 1990s JRPG fan and built a brand-new game purely from the idealised memories that have grown abundantly amongst the grey matter.

Mixing 2D character sprites and 3D, almost pop-up-book-like environments, *Octopath Traveler* is quite unlike any other ostensibly retro-styled game on the market. The way its sands shimmer and its waterways glisten, catching the sun's rays just so, is beautiful. Its snow fields appear so crisp you'll swear you could reach into your Switch and touch them. But your party – recruited one by one, around the centre of the map's least-dangerous regions – can't wander freely, soaking in the surroundings. Combat encounters occur randomly when outside of the game's many towns, and these turn-based rough-and-tumbles represent another of this game's significant strengths.

Every character, one of which you must select as your overall protagonist at the game's beginning, has a specific set of skills and abilities. Some can strike hard with a sword or spear. Others cast deadly magic against foes, from crackling lightning to roaring flames. There are support characters, who cast buffs and sap enemy strength. Of indispensable healers and damage dealers, *Octopath Traveler* has its share, then. But battles can rarely be won, effectively at least, by routinely unloading your party's most powerful offensive actions.

Every opponent you run into has a number of weaknesses – and exploiting these will break their defences, leaving them dizzied and vulnerable to more devastating attacks. With the order of each combatant's turn displayed in the top left of the screen, battles become a delightful dance of forward planning and smart reactions, where oftentimes it's better to use a weak blow to trigger a break than it is firing up a maximum-energy elemental attack. Stir a *Bravely Default*-style multiple-strikes-per-turn system into the mix – you can carry over "Battle Points", dealing up to four attacks with one move – and *Octopath Traveler*'s combat is never less than riveting.

And it has to be, frankly, because the stories that guide these eight adventurers are predominantly a mixed bag of revenge clichés and forgettable background fluffiness. With exceptions. Primrose, who we meet working as a dancer in the desert city of Sunshade, may well be driven by vengeance, but the lengths she is prepared to go to in order to find her father's killers are shocking. Rather more cheerfully, the good-natured merchant Tressa sets out simply to better herself professionally and make life easier for her family back home. The apothecary Alfyn and cleric Ophelia are also more likeable than not.

That these eight separate tales never satisfyingly tie together is *Octopath Traveler*'s greatest failing, though. That certain characters' quests are clearly designed with more love than others, another. But player attachments to their distinct hopes and hardships must often be put aside to guarantee a balanced party of four, split between compatible classes. Yes, that means you'll have to take the grumpy thief Therion out with you, once in a while. Suck it up, because he's great for lifting you free goodies, too – an example of the game's Path Actions, unique abilities that can be used in and outside of towns to benefit coffers and combat prowess alike.

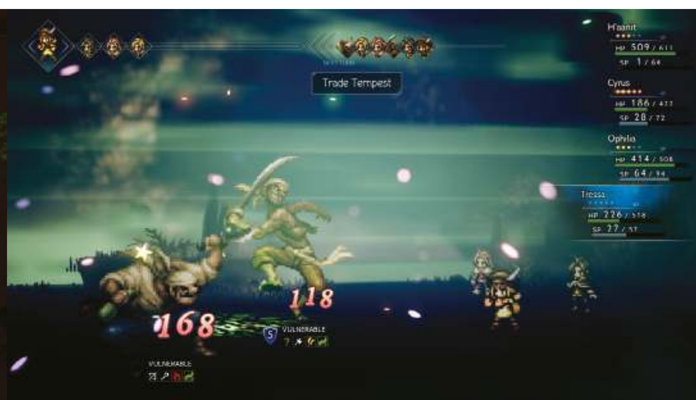
That you'll definitely find yourself humming one of *Octopath Traveler*'s gentle melodies, while putting the kettle on or waiting for the bus, might have you thinking it, too, could be an all-timer. And it sometimes comes close to becoming one to remember. But while it has some great ideas, and its presentation is sublime from monster design to menu layout, several undercooked narrative beats leave it comfortably in the "could've been a contender" category.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

BACK STORY: Unlike many JRPGS, *Octopath Traveler*'s NPCs aren't bland vessels existing only to deliver inane dialogue. Many have fascinating backgrounds, so get scrutinizing with the scholar Cyrus's Path Action.

VERDICT 7/10
BEAUTIFUL BUT HAMPERED BY LACKLUSTER STORYTELLING





MISSING A STITCH

Unravel Two

There's a lot of heart in *Unravel Two*. There's some real love and thought and compassion seeping out of it and that's to be commended. It's a game that ramps up rather nicely as the various meanings of being a character made of yarn and all of the vulnerabilities and strengths that comes to embody it are revealed and made apparent. It's a game that should be a real tearjerker by its conclusion. But it didn't quite hit us that hard.

So, as we concluded the four or so hours of *Unravel Two*, we were left wondering what was missing? The game has made significant strides forward from its forebear with much improved platforming being the biggest change. The game feels tighter and more controlled than before, which is good. It also looks fantastic with some great level design and that same dense, rich feel to the world. Many of the levels are also set either at night or in darker areas, which despite the bright, hopeful feel of the game overall, actually works really well. It brings a little edge and threat that the original game was sorely lacking.

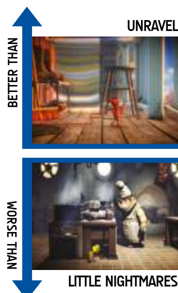
And there's tandem character/co-op gameplay, which is a welcome addition too. It brings a whole new dimension to the puzzle platforming as you can either control each yarn character with a friend or switch between them manually on your own. Either way works really well, as thinking about the right place to put each character and how you can use the link of yarn between them can be a nice head-scratcher. There is, however, no real mind-bogglers in there. The pace of the game seemingly taking precedence over any challenge in the story campaign.

And other than an unheralded and sharp difficulty spike in the last couple of chapters, the real test comes from the 20 challenge levels, with a new set opening up every couple of chapters. These are genuinely difficult, requiring good timing of your swings, but also a lot of improvisation, as you won't always know what comes next or where you're heading.

But still, something is missing and in essence it's that there's something slightly safe about the experience. The attention to detail and the use of a background story throughout of two kids escaping together speaks to a real passion and depth of feeling in the game-makers, but like a piece of art outside a multinational bank, there's an air of the artificial about it. We feel rather harsh saying so, but its beats feel so similar to *Journey* and *Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons* that it feels like a solid homage more than something standing on its own terms. For something light and enjoyable, we would certainly recommend it, but don't expect this one to reach down and really grab a hold of your soul.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: Coldwood Interactive
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes





Above: There's a moodier edge to proceedings in *Unravel Two* and we like the shift as it brings some much needed darkness to contrast with the cute Yarny characters. A threat appears to hang in the air even if it never really arrives.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

BETTER BASICS: Our abiding concern with the original *Unravel* was that its basic platforming and puzzling just didn't match the quality of the world. While *Unravel Two* is not more complex, it's definitely tighter and more polished.

VERDICT 7/10

A FINE CONTINUATION ON THE ORIGINAL'S PROMISE



Above: As you play through the game you'll see a story play out in smoky outlines of kids running away from adults. How much impact you're having or how much is just a memory is left to you to figure out.



NO WE'RE NOT CRYING, YOU'RE CRYING

The Awesome Adventures of Captain Spirit

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS4
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: Dontnod
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

We know what bad guys look like – games have reinforced the stereotype for years. We recognise them even before the menacing music kicks in.

It's different in *The Awesome Adventures of Captain Spirit*, though. The line between archetypal good and bad characters isn't blurred as much as non-existent, and there's no subtle camera angles or music cues to choreograph how we're supposed to feel about them. But when the good guys do terrible things, and the bad guys are capable of kindness, how *are* we supposed to feel? And what can we do when the decisions we make – the ones made on reckless, feckless impulse – are the wrong ones?

Dontnod's *Life Is Strange* is a supernatural coming-of-age tale, and it's to this universe that we return to in *Captain Spirit*. And while we don't, as yet, know how Chris' story fits into *Life Is Strange 2*, we know one thing: our choices matter.

Clocking in at just a couple of hours long, *Captain Spirit* features just two main characters, and set entirely in and around a single-story, rundown house. We meet Chris, a small kid with an enormous imagination, and it's this ability to fabricate stories that makes up much of *Captain Spirit*'s adventures. A trip to turn on the hot water becomes a battle against the hulking Water Eater, and a miscellaneous pile of rubbish in the yard becomes a secret maze.

And he's a good kid; kind and thoughtful. He completes household chores – laundry, washing up, fixing lunch – without being asked. He talks to himself a lot – a fairly typical side-effect of single-child-ism, we reckon – but as the story ambles along, you'll realise he's lonely, and how immersing himself in a make-believe life is sometimes preferable to his real one.

If you've played any of the previous *Life Is Strange* episodes, the mechanics will feel the same. Beyond a couple of harder-than-you-might-expect puzzles it's pretty much do this, collect that. Occasionally the prompts are hidden behind the character or props, and every now and then your invisible reticle gets a little twitchy, jumping from one prompt to the next, but the tasks all feel a bit like filler, really; the story is what matters here.

Despite a masterful lack of violence, the story (child bereavement and abuse) is brutal and heartbreaking nonetheless. You feel bad for Chris, and his father, and then furious, and then desperately sad again, which is a lot of emotions to cycle through in such a brief amount of time. And though it feels very much as though everything – from the score, to the graphics, to the little in-game puzzles – is stitched together to be as intentionally emotional as possible, the careful characterisation makes the cast, and story, come to life… even if it is really, *really* tough to watch sometimes.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

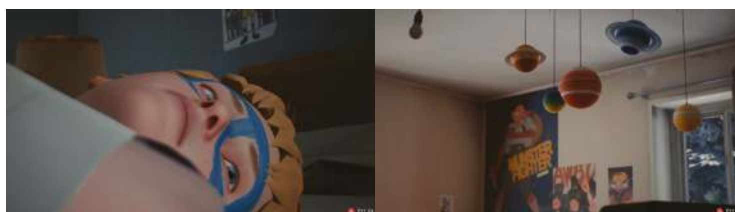
BEHIND CLOSED DOORS: Dontnod's careful portrayal of abuse side-steps sweeping stereotypes and instead paints a desperately sad story that's delicately nuanced. And if you don't want to give Chris a massive hug by the end, you're made of tougher stuff that we are.

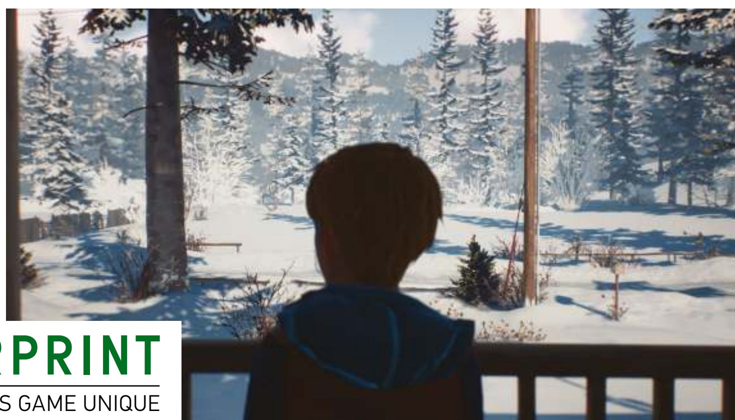


BETTER THAN VIRGINIA
WORSE THAN GONE HOME



Above: Chris retreats into his own little world of superheroes and supervillains to counteract his sad, lonely existence, turning everyday chores and events into fun little games to keep himself busy. In his world, the good guys *always* win.







Above: No jokes here, we're afraid – Chris has just finished his breakfast but already dad's in his chair, sitting beneath a memory of his glory days as he watches the game with a bottle of whiskey beside him. Ugh, we need a hug.

VERDICT 7/10
A TOUGH-TO-WATCH VIGNETTE OF FAMILIAL LOVE AND LOSS



After the satisfying combat found in *LEGO The Ninjago Movie*, the brawling in *The Incredibles* is far more basic. There are combos to pull off, but there's very little excitement to be had. The ability to power-up characters to create screen-filling chaos is a nice touch, though.

NOT SO MUCH INCREDIBLE AS EXPENDABLE

LEGO The Incredibles

Every now and then a LEGO release comes along that revitalises the long-running franchise and takes the series is fresh and exciting directions. *LEGO The Incredibles* is not that game. Instead it's the gaming equivalent of comfort food, as it offers snackable, familiar gameplay that you'll enjoy while you're consuming it, but you'll get very little nourishment from.

Of course you can argue that it's sheer familiarity is one of the key things that has made the LEGO series so popular in the first place and there's no denying that certain elements of TT Fusion's latest game are enjoyable. The presentation for example is excellent, effortlessly capturing the stylish charm of the movies, while easily introducing familiar LEGO elements like building and blind bags. We're also impressed with how well the gameplay focuses on characters teaming up in order to overcome many of the obstacles and puzzles found throughout the six-hour odd adventure. Mr Incredible uses his strength to lob his family to reach otherwise unreachable ledges, Dash can use his speed to propel Elastigirl while she's in boatform (as he does in the original movie), while Violet can let others enter her forcefield so they can pass over inhospitable areas. It works really well and nicely plays upon the teamwork that is so prominent in the movies. It's a pity then that the vast majority of their powers (and of the other heroes and villains that you can unlock) are so similar to those we've seen in countless other LEGO games already.

The vast majority of LEGO games have always been built around obvious templates and the same is true here. That's not to say that *LEGO The Incredibles* doesn't attempt to occasionally stretch the mould, but it's far too formulaic a game to actually try breaking it. Multibuilds allow you to break down a creation and then re-use it to build something else, while Family Builds require you to collect a set amount of Incrediblocks before unleashing them in a dull button-bashing minigame sequence. Far stronger are the Crime Wave missions that pop up throughout the hub world. Bookended by entertaining cutscenes you're required to rush around the large overworld solving crimes and helping people, while battling a number of key villains. Sadly, while the hub is quite fun to navigate many of the bricks are extremely easy to find, with many just lying around waiting to be picked up, meaning it's one of the easiest LEGO games we've played.

LEGO The Incredibles is easily one of the weakest LEGO games we've played for some time, but that doesn't mean it's not entertaining. You're going to get a lot more satisfaction out of it when playing with younger relatives, and the stud collecting isn't as expansive as we'd like but it's still a diverting timewaster.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Switch, Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: England
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER: TT Fusion
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

CHALLENGE: We know it's for kids, but *LEGO The Incredibles* could really do with some better challenges as it all starts to become a little dull compared to other games in the series.



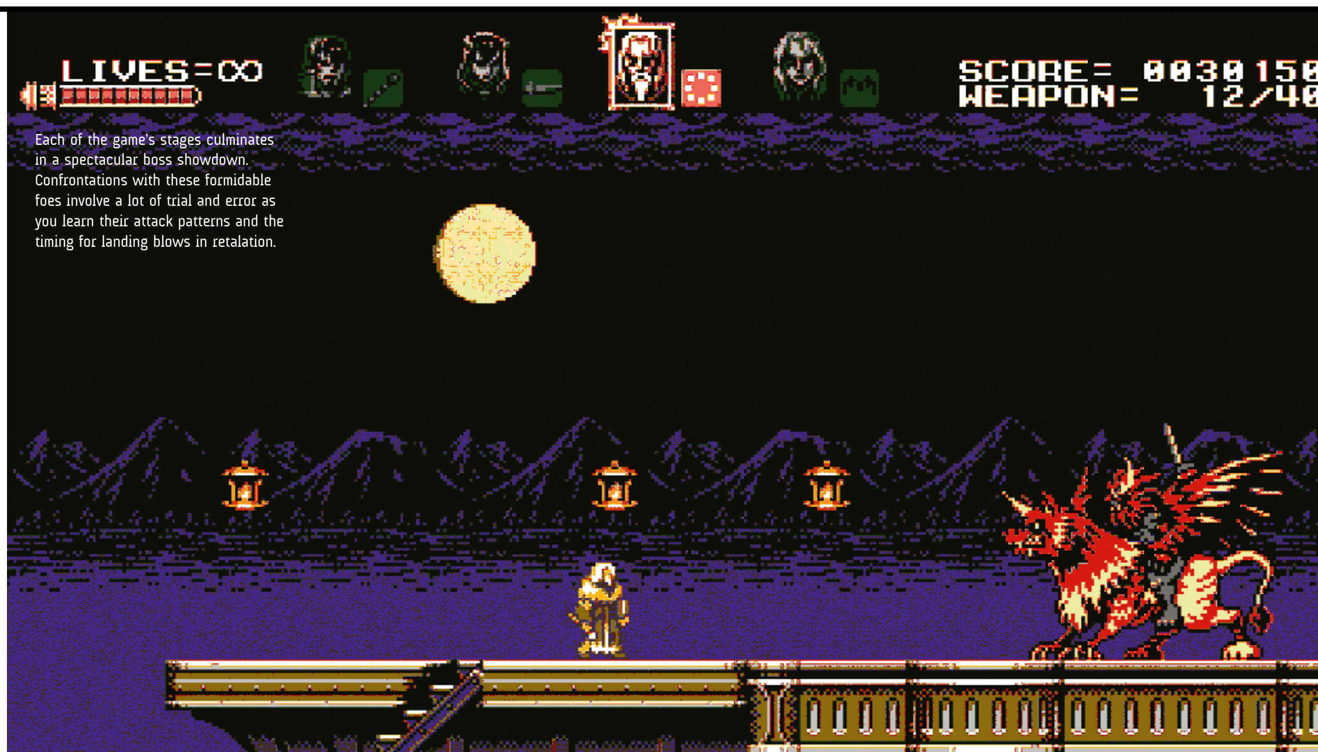


Above: There are an insanely large number of different vehicles to build and unlock throughout *LEGO The Incredibles*, but they feature the same twitchy and oversensitive controls that plague many of the other games in the series.



VERDICT 5/10

LEGO'S 13-YEAR-OLD SERIES NEEDS SERIOUS REBUILDING



Each of the game's stages culminates in a spectacular boss showdown. Confrontations with these formidable foes involve a lot of trial and error as you learn their attack patterns and the timing for landing blows in retalation.

IN WITH THE OLD

Bloodstained: Curse of the Moon

Stretch goals rarely extend beyond the realms of additional platforms and added modes, but Inti Creates had much loftier ambitions for its surplus funds, promising to conjure up a standalone 8-bit mini-game should the crowdfunding masses contribute enough coin towards their beautiful action-platformer *Bloodstained: Ritual Of The Night*. That promise materialised as *Bloodstained: Curse Of The Moon*, a delightfully retro spin-off set in the same universe and featuring the main game's cast as playable characters.

Curse Of The Moon discards all modern bells and whistles in favour of an experience that looks and feels every bit like a bona fide NES-era *Castlevania* title. Able to switch between the game's four characters at will, you are tasked with traversing a labyrinth of gloomy gothic settings, doing battle with all manner of demons, from giant bats to bow-wielding skeletons. Each member of this quixotic quartet has their own special abilities and secondary weapons; some add extra oomph in battle while others allow access to different routes through the eight stages of this peril-riddled platformer. Miriam's whip attack and enhanced athletic prowess make her invaluable, as does Alucard-like Gebel's ability to transform himself into a bat and sail over the game's precarious platforming sections with carefree ease, while Zangetsu's lack of range and alchemist Alfred's lower health means they're largely left sitting on the bench.

Inti Creations has perfectly captured both the look and feel of a game that's nearing its 30-year anniversary, and, as such, can be punishing for the untrained thumbs and dulled response times of a modern audience. There is a less grueling setting for those uninitiated with games from the days of yore that grants a never-ending supply of continues. For a true taste of the past, however, Veteran mode includes the all but defunct notion of limited lives, also, getting hit means you get knocked back, leading to more than a few instances of characters plummeting straight to their deaths as enemies provide a relentless assault and the platforming elements really come into play during the game's later levels.

In true retro fashion, characters feel slow and sluggish and have limited movement when it comes to attacking and evading, while these elements can cause occasional frustration, there's also an undeniable charm to *Curse Of The Moon*'s staunchly old-school style. It's a lovingly crafted, bare-bones approach that pays homage to the platforming greats, relying on the challenge of its limited yet solid mechanics rather than variety and flair.

Additional modes and multiple paths through levels grant a lot of replay value to what's otherwise a short-lived side-scroller, and while it might feel too out-dated for some, for fans of gaming's more archaic era, it's a challenging and nostalgic excursion that serves as a fitting warm-up for Bloodstained's main event.



DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: 3DS, PC, PS4, PS Vita, Switch
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Inti Creates
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £8.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

LONE WOLF: There's a hidden choice that drastically changes the game; instead of recruiting your three companions, you can sacrifice them to imbue Zengetsu with extra powers, or simply ignore them entirely.

VERDICT 7/10

A DELIGHTFUL AND DEMANDING TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE

BUMP AND GRIND

Wreckfest



In the continued chase for fidelity, something has been lost. As consoles have become more technically capable and gaming has become a far more serious affair, the idea that we might play just to have fun is fading and instead it seems we're always requiring some imagined reason to press start. Racing games have suffered the most in that regard: the likes of Need For Speed flounder by adding more bombast while the other end of the spectrum forgoes any sense of enjoyment with po-faced Forza Motorsport or Gran Turismo.

That's in part what makes *Wreckfest* so refreshing. This game doesn't ignore the fact that the average racing game player is looking at opposing racers not as rivals to bypass but as tools for ricocheting their own car around a sharp bend without slowing down. It accepts that braking before a corner is only something nerds and Formula 1 drivers think about. It harkens back to a time when *Destruction Derby* was the game to beat. Admittedly it introduces this once-upon-a-time style of arcade racing by forcing lawnmowers into a melee, but that's nothing if not novel.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Finland
PUBLISHER: THQ Nordic
DEVELOPER: Bugbear Entertainment
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now (Consoles: November 20 2018)
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 2.7 GHz Dual Core CPU, 4GB RAM, NVidia GTX 460 or AMD Radeon 6850, 15GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN
DIRT SHOWDOWN



WORSE THAN
DIRT 2



Above: It's certainly got the clout to look great on any sort of machine, with a good amount of variety in the few stages that there are. Nothing beats the visual thrill of colliding (purposely) with a stack of tyres, however.

The star of the show, then, is the physics system, a soft-body damage model that means even the most timid drivers will end a race with a car skewed slightly to the right. This adds weight to the driving itself, and as you're careening around the track colliding into things you'll certainly feel it. Of course this necessary aggression also affects the way your car drives; too many shunts and you'll find you're steering ever so slightly to one side, keep it up and you'll find yourself struggling to compete. While hitting immovable objects does seem to punish you excessively more than a piledriver into the side of a rival, for the most part it is well balanced especially considering the availability of various vehicle upgrades that offer up a little progression.

Admittedly that is where the game suffers a little. A series of uninventive menus are all that tie the disparate circuit race or derby events together, and while the *Driveclub*-style bonus objectives provide enough within each race to get you playing in a certain way, they do feel mostly tacked-on. For a game that's as celebratory of the chaos and excitement of this breed of racing, a set of staid menu clicks and unoriginal in-event objectives and XP gains shouldn't be all that's used to push proceedings along. We're not asking for much, but *Dirt 2* eschewed its suitable X Games vibe masterfully; even that would have been enough to tie everything together. Instead it becomes apparent that this is just another racer where all you're doing is going through the motions: ticking off objectives, filling up arbitrary bars and collecting credits for unlocks.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

WRECKFESTIVAL: It's a shame that this game restricts its progression to a string of levels and menus. Leveraging a similar sensation to *Dirt 2*'s extreme sports festival atmosphere and building progression around that is all *Wreckfest* needed.

Mechanically there's a great racer here and one that is well worth playing, but four years of early access hasn't resolved a dull progression system and its limited content holds *Wreckfest* back from being entirely worth its price tag.

VERDICT 8/10
A FANTASTIC REIMAGINING OF ARCADE RACING.

Below: There's an amusing amount of drama and spectacle put into the lawnmower derbies, where you'll see ragdoll drivers flung from their sweet rides and fires starting should you hit one firmly and squarely enough to topple it.





LOST IN TIME

Earthfall

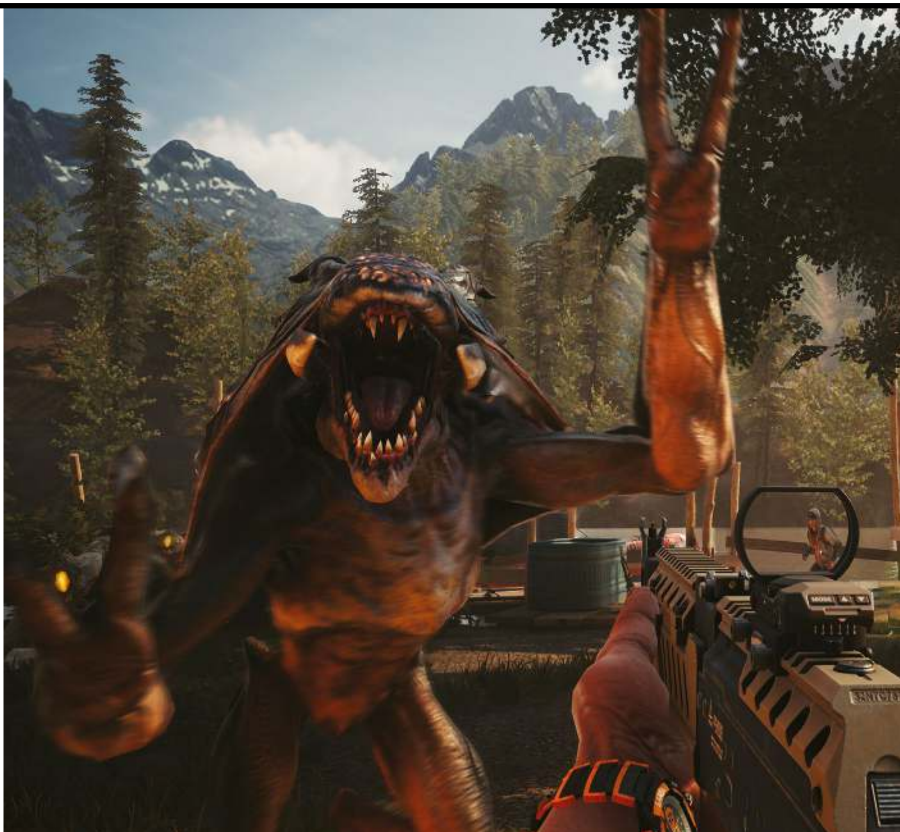
Almost everything in this world is made better when there is a gaggle of good friends by your side. That's true of so many things that you'll encounter in life, regardless of whether you are running activities outdoors or teaming up to fight back an encroaching enemy threat online. In fact, this comes into a particularly sharp focus when considering the realms of online gaming, as even the most rote of multiplayer experiences can become transformed by the addition of a few friends to a game lobby – the lines of communication a muddled mess of in-jokes, bad tactical decisions and howls of laughter that echo long into the night. This is one of the reasons that judging an experience such as *Earthfall* – a cooperative shooter by its very design – can become an exercise in expectation management. Get the right people together and you'll certainly have an enjoyable enough time, though is that because of the game itself or because of the people you're with? In the case of *Earthfall*, any good times that are to be found are largely in spite of the game itself rather than a direct result of anything it has to offer.

It is, truthfully, difficult to separate *Earthfall* from the litany of genre games that have come before it. That was always to be expected. *Left 4 Dead* and its sequel cast such a monumental shadow over the co-op shooter space that any game that dares step into it will not only inevitably invite comparison but also come off worse because of it. A decade ago Valve South (Turtle Rock Studios) perfected the co-op shooter, setting a benchmark for AI design, expansive linear storytelling and dynamic interplay between characters that simply hasn't been matched since.

Earthfall is no exception, falling short in just about every respect. It delivers surprisingly few new ideas, seeking to offer little more than a would-be *Left 4 Dead* experience with the zombies swapped out for invading aliens. While the template is certainly recognisable, the game itself fails to nail the basics, let alone innovate on them in any real sense.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Holospark
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Below: *Earthfall* has some nice ideas, but so many of them are inseparable from the decade-old *Left 4 Dead*. Holospark deserves credit for bringing this long-dormant formula back to the fore, but it clearly needed a little more time in development.





FAQs

Q. IS THIS *LEFT 4 DEAD* WITH ALIENS?
In theory, yes. That is certainly what the developer is shooting for, though it sadly falls short.

Q. WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?
Earthfall fails to offer an experience that's reactive to your presence or actions. It impacts the difficulty curve and any notion of replayability.

Q. CAN IT BE PLAYED SOLO?
It can indeed be played solo, with AI taking on the role of your three companions, but we wouldn't recommend it.



IT DELIVERS SURPRISINGLY FEW NEW IDEAS, OFFERING LITTLE MORE THAN A WOULD-BE LEFT 4 DEAD EXPERIENCE

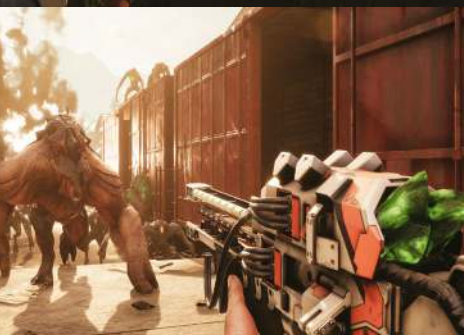




Below: Weapon handling and feedback isn't quite where it needs to be, particularly for an experience so heavily focused around shooting waves of enemies.



Above: The friendly AI is frustratingly inconsistent. It doesn't seem to matter how far you dial up its proficiencies it will likely end up making the worst tactical decision imaginable, often favouring shooting enemies rather than helping you up off the ground.







Sending a group of four wayward survivors through ten linear missions, split across two campaigns, *Earthfall* ushers you into the outskirts of an alien invasion. You're tasked with fending off wave after wave of threats, a sea of uncharacteristic drones occasionally punctuated by the appearance of 'special' enemies that seek to divide your group in a number of familiar ways. The Threshers are prone to pouncing, putting one of your crew temporarily out of commission. The Sappers explode, briefly disorientating anybody caught in the blast radius, while the Whiplashes have a tendency to pull one member out of the action until rescued by a buddy. They are practically one-for-one with the specials of *Left 4 Dead*, albeit with less personality or presence.

One of *Earthfall*'s biggest issues is that it doesn't feel finely tuned. With 10 firearms to be found, you'll find that the weapon handling for each ranges between ropey at best and downright tedious at worst. But if there is any one thing that all of the weapons have in common it's that they all feel suitably underpowered; feedback is a huge issue here, with the sniper rifles and shotguns feeling decidedly floaty and ineffectual, even as you're lopping off alien body parts and bursting heads. If you're connecting bullets with an enemy you want to know about it, you want to feel it in your fingers, particularly as the bruisier bosses come into play.

Perhaps the biggest missed opportunity here, however, is that lack of any real sense of ingrained replayability. The enemy AI systems aren't particularly smart, nor do they ever seem to react in any meaningful way to your successes or failures throughout a campaign; reactive AI is one piece of the *L4D* puzzle that made it such a genuine phenomenon and its absence is almost immediately noticeable. It's also somewhat surprising to find that *Earthfall* has very little in the way of randomised elements; weapon and item drops are always the same, the objectives never shift, nor does the placement or composition of the enemy waves. All of this only helps to foster a game environment that quickly grows stale, with Holospark offering little more than escalating difficulty modes to help keep players enticed.

All of these problems become somewhat exacerbated depending on how you choose to play. Play in solo and you'll quickly begin to loathe the friendly AI, with its priorities seemingly laser focused on firing at enemies rather than helping you up off the floor. Attempt to jump online and you'll likely encounter some pretty severe connection issues. *Earthfall* offers no easy way to filter games based on connection – in fact, it hides ping entirely – while the lack of any stable host migration means that, should the host drop out of the game for any reason and at any time, the entire campaign will come to an unceremonious end.

If you were to assemble the right group of friends online you would likely have a good time with *Earthfall*. Approached in a certain way, its numerous idiosyncrasies could give off a hokey B-movie vibe that's easy enough to get behind for a few hours – and we do mean that literally, the two campaigns can be completed as quickly as five hours on regular difficulty.

But when it's all said and done it's difficult to escape the mindset that *Earthfall* has taken the template of a decade-old experience for inspiration and failed to replicate (or expand on) it in any meaningful way.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

GET GROUPED: Getting a group of players together in *Earthfall* is easy enough, although it does, at the time of writing, have a handful of connection issues that might cause frustration.

FIGHT TO SURVIVE

One interesting concept that *Earthfall* plays with comes in the form of 3D printers in some of the safe houses. These devices give you and your team the opportunity to print different weapons into existence, giving you the option of switching up weapons to face any new threat that may appear on the scene. It's a nice idea, although you'll likely end up settling into a rhythm of using it as a glorified ammo dispensary. It's that function that becomes particularly helpful on later missions in the game, where ammo is in short supply and your group will need to use aggressively-smart tactics (and a handful of the barricades and traps that can be found strewn across the map) in an effort to survive.

VERDICT 4/10

EARTHFALL CAN'T ESCAPE THE SHADOWS OF THE PAST

NEW SYSTEM, NEW LEVELS, RENEWED VISION

Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker



Above: Some of the stages have some interesting nooks to explore, but finding your way to them can require a little lateral thinking. Working within the limitations of Toad's movement can still offer opportunities.

Having taken a look at Captain Toad once before on its Wii U release we ask that you forgive us if we take this opportunity to pontificate on how this game exemplifies Nintendo at its best as much as we talk about the quality of the game. We enjoyed it before and we enjoy it now. We won't leave it there, but we'll certainly take a detour for a moment and ask your patience in the meantime.

Nintendo doesn't always hit it out of the park and sometimes it doesn't aim to. *Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker* is not a game intended to wow the hardcore fanbase or blow people away with its innovation. It is supposed to entertain for a few hours and offer bite-size nuggets of uplifting and engaging puzzle action. And when Nintendo aims that little bit lower, beneath its loftier aims for a new Mario game or a new Zelda, it often manages to create something really wonderful. *Treasure Tracker* is such an experience.

Even if this weren't a re-release we would say that it feels familiar. Having Toad or Toadette waddle around a small 3D level trying to collect diamonds, find hidden secrets and ultimately grab a star before moving on is structurally very familiar even if the pieces are new.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
OTHER FORMATS: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Nintendo EAD Tokyo
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



It's very reminiscent of classic *Mario Vs Donkey Kong* gameplay albeit with an extra third dimension in play, but the essence is similar. The puzzle to solve is how you get around the level, sometimes introducing new mechanics, grabbing everything you can on the way. It's very simple and stripped back, but very rewarding too.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

MULTIPLAYER FUN: A second player can join in the action with a Joy-con, giving them the ability to shoot turnips while player one performs actions as normal.

Speaking more specifically about this Switch release, many of the rougher edges of the original feel as if they have been ironed away. Whereas once switching your view away from the big screen to the controller was a distraction, now you can play in handheld mode and the occasional touch control feels nowhere near as jarring. The same goes for using tilt controls for aiming when you have the option to fire turnips from a cannon (only in a Mario universe game does that sentence make sense).

What continues to impress on our second time playing through *Treasure Tracker* is the quality of the level design. The addition of stages based on worlds from *Super Mario Odyssey* is yet more evidence that these little dioramas are a rich format for creativity. The small interactions that allow Toad to move around and navigate make them very pleasant little puzzle boxes to spend time working your way through. The format also makes it ideal for playing on the move, so it will play just as nicely on 3DS as it does on Switch in handheld mode.

VERDICT 8/10
A BETTER FIT ON SWITCH



Above: There are lots of nods to *Super Mario Bros. 2* throughout this game, not least with the turnips and Shy Guys playing such prominent roles throughout.



RETRO

NO.203



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THE RETRO GUIDE TO...
GAME BOY ADVANCE GAMES

Nintendo's 32-bit handheld might not have had the longest of lifespans, but it did have an incredibly diverse selection of games. Here are just a few of them…

NINTENDO WAS THE leading publisher in the handheld market when it released the Game Boy Advance in 2001. And why wouldn't it be? It had seen off competition from Sega, SNK and Bandai and, bar the WonderSwan, essentially had the market to itself for most of the time it was on sale.

Thanks to the popularity of the Game Boy and Game Boy Color, Nintendo's 32-bit handheld had a strong launch and while it wouldn't exceed the number of Game Boys that Nintendo sold, it still managed to shift over 81 million units. Interestingly, just three years after the GBA was released, Nintendo released another handheld in the form of the DS. Its popularity didn't seem to harm the GBA, though, with countless third party publishers supporting it with a range of incredible games. Nintendo itself would support the system until 2006, while the last official game was released in the US in 2008.

Rather than focus on the numerous SNES adaptations that appeared on the system, we're instead focusing on the many great exclusives the Game Boy Advance had in its own right.

How many of the following gems do you remember playing?

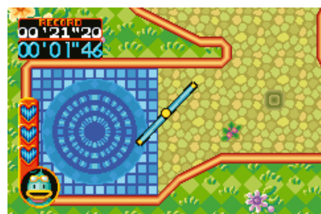


WARIO LAND 4 2001

NINTENDO R&D1

Although Nintendo didn't release an original Mario platformer for its portable system, *Wario Land 4* was a more-than-welcome substitute. Boasting delightful visuals and some interesting stage design, Wario's fourth outing has him navigating a dangerous pyramid in search of treasure. It's not the most innovative game that Nintendo has made, but it's filled with character and offers endless replay value.





KURU KURU KURURIN 2001

EIGHTING

Developer Eighting is best known for its shoot 'em ups, but in March 2001 it introduced Western gamers to one of the GBA's most infuriatingly challenging puzzle games. The concept of *Kuru Kuru Kururin* couldn't be more simple; you just have to navigate your Helirin (which is manned by a cute duck) through a series of increasingly complex mazes. Of course, the rub here is that your Helirin (which looks like a long stick) is constantly spinning and cannot touch the walls of the maze, which considerably ramps up the difficulty level.

There are different speeds to manage and it's possible to change the direction of your rotations, but you'll still need incredible dexterity and nerves of steel to make it through the later stages. The level design ramps up really well to keep you on your toes. Don't be surprised if you learn a few new swear words along the way as well, because it's a game deserving of emotional outbursts from time to time. A sequel, *Kururin Paradise*, came out in 2002 but was confined to Japan, unfortunately.

ADVANCE WARS 2001

INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

With so much focus on bite-sized gameplay it's astonishing to think that Intelligent System's entertaining war series started off on the Famicom. Despite requiring the player to manage all sorts of different troops and worry about terrain and other parameters, the entry level to *Advance Wars* is surprisingly easy thanks to excellent tutorials and faultless presentation. The powers of the commanding officers can easily turn games, while the multiplayer mode offers plenty of long-term challenge.









MARIO KART: SUPER CIRCUIT 2001

INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

There are many who still feel that this is one of the best games in the Mario Kart series and we're inclined to agree. It features the same clever, tight track design that made the original SNES game so much fun to play and manages to offer a fun (but limited) multiplayer mode off a single game cartridge (it's expanded when played across multiple carts). While the 20 available tracks are challenging enough, collecting 100 coins in each tournament unlocks the original *Super Mario Kart* tracks as well, allowing you to relive those original time trials all over again.

GURU LOGI CHAMP 2001

COMPILE

Frustratingly, the GBA's best puzzle game is a Japanese exclusive. Fortunately, it's easy to understand and like the best puzzle games, is simple to pick up, but tough to master. The game shares similarities with *Picross* and *Magical Drop*, but here you must complete shapes by manipulating a set number of blocks in order to finish each image. You'll need to constantly rotate each puzzle to create new ways of getting your blocks in the right place. Features an equally hectic multiplayer battle mode.









SONIC ADVANCE 2001

DIMPS, SONIC TEAM

Sonic Advance represented the unthinkable: a Sonic game on a Nintendo format. It proved a wise gamble for Sega, however, and it's easily the best of the three Advance games on the system. *Advance*'s four playable characters (Sonic, Tails, Knuckles and Amy) have unique moves, which open up the game nicely, while an entertaining minigame, Tiny Chao Garden, and a fun multiplayer mode ensures plenty of longevity.





METROID FUSION 2002

NINTENDO R&D1

While the boss battles and exploration is every bit as good as you'd expect from a Metroid game, *Fusion* also introduces a deadly cat and mouse element as Samus gets hunted down by a deadly clone of herself. It's also notable for using the GBA Advance link cable to link to *Metroid Prime* to unlock neat extras, including the original NES *Metroid*.

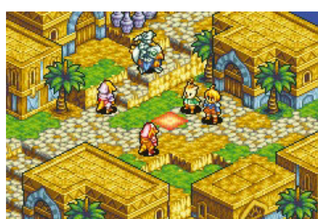
SONIC ADVANCE REPRESENTED THE UNTHINKABLE: A SONIC GAME ON A NINTENDO FORMAT

STREET FIGHTER ALPHA 3 UPPER 2002

CRAWFISH INTERACTIVE

While there are plenty of exclusive one-on-one fighters for the GBA, we really wanted to sing the praises of Crawfish's astonishing Street Fighter port. It's clearly been compromised in terms of fewer levels, stripped back speech and only four buttons, but it still plays like the arcade original, which is no mean feat. In fact, it even manages to add extra characters (Eagle, Maki and Yun) who don't appear in the arcade original.





FINAL FANTASY TACTICS ADVANCE 2003

SQUARE PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT DIVISION 4

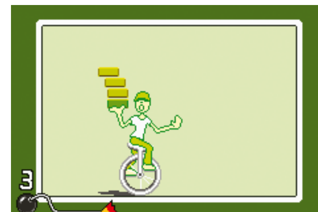
This staggeringly in-depth SRPG builds on the elements introduced in the PlayStation game giving you a large number of races and jobs to level up. One of the most interesting additions are Judges who adjudicate battles and stop you from using certain skills. A satisfyingly deep experience that spawned a DS sequel in 2007.

WARIOWARE, INC: MEGA MICROGAMES! 2003

NINTENDO R&D1

Nintendo's superb minigame compilation is as frantic as it is inventive. Only having a few seconds to complete each crazy task keeps the tension high, while the games themselves are easy to pick up but hard to master on the later stages. It's all held together by some truly bizarre characters and a really wacky sense of humour. The GBA's gyro, sensor-based sequel, *WarioWare Twisted*, is also worth picking up.





NINJA COP 2003

HUDSON SOFT

Known in America as *Ninja Five-O*, this excellent action game is an unusual GBA release as it was not released in Japan, despite being made there. The game itself is a satisfying blend of Shinobi and Bionic Commando, with your ninja being able to navigate his way around the large interlocked rooms by using a handy grappling hook. It's not the most original title in the GBA's vast library but it's put together with some incredible panache and features an array of ridiculously over-the-top bosses. Its limited shelf life means complete copies of the game can now fetch over £350.





FIRE EMBLEM 2003

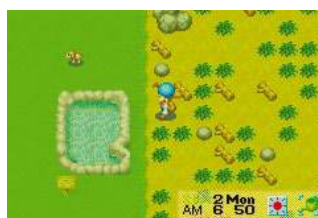
INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

Like *Advance Wars*, *Fire Emblem* was already an established franchise in Japan, with this particular GBA game being the second title to be released on the system, and the seventh overall. While it looks fundamentally very similar to *Advance Wars*, it features numerous different mechanics including a weapon triangle system and permadeath (which makes the game very challenging if you want to complete it with all the original heroes). Characters can also be upgraded once a specific level is achieved and weapons slowly erode over time. It now fetches a pretty penny online.

HARVEST MOON: FRIENDS OF MINERAL TOWN 2003

MARVELOUS INTERACTIVE

This is actually a port of the PlayStation, *Back To Nature*. While much of the game is based around the maintenance of your small farm, you'll also participate in various festivals and find suitable suitors to date. *Harvest Moon: More Friends Of Mineral Town* is the same game with a female protagonist and numerous gameplay changes and improvements.









CASTLEVANIA: ARIA OF SORROW 2003

KONAMI COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT TOKYO

Three Castlevania titles were released for the Game Boy Advance, but the third entry is easily our favourite. It sets itself apart from the earlier two games thanks to the new Tactical Soul system, which makes a huge impact during play. Killing enemies can release souls, which the player can then equip and use in battle. Souls come in four distinct types and can also be traded with others via the GBA link cable. Both the Tactical Soul system and protagonist, Soma Cruz returned for the DS sequel, *Castlevania: Dawn Of Sorrow* in 2005.

BOKTAI: THE SUN IS IN YOUR HAND 2003

KONAMI COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT JAPAN

Although Hideo Kojima never released a Metal Gear game on the GBA, he did grace it with this inventive offering. What makes *Boktai* so unique is the light sensor on the cartridge, which encourages you to play outside as it charges your weapons and can affect the game's environments. Two sequels also appeared on the GBA, with the third being a Japanese exclusive.



POKÉMON PINBALL: RUBY AND SAPPHIRE 2003

JUPITER

Several pinball games were released on the Game Boy Advance, but this is our favourite. It features two distinct tables based around *Pokémon Ruby* and *Sapphire* and retains *Pokémon Pinball*'s Catch 'Em Mode where you must hit a Pokémon several times with your ball in order to catch it (over 200 are available to find). There's also rumble support if played on a Game Boy Player.

THREE CASTLEVANIA TITLES WERE RELEASED FOR THE GAME BOY ADVANCE, BUT THE THIRD ENTRY IS OUR FAVOURITE





GOLDEN SUN 1 & 2 2001/2003

CAMELOT SOFTWARE PLANNING

This epic RPG was originally planned for the N64, before Camelot shifted focus to the GBA and split its idea across two games (the final part, *The Lost Age*, would appear the following year). *Golden Sun* focuses on the manipulation of Djinn, which can aid the player in several ways. It's also a truly stunning game with some fantastic elemental attacks.



THE GBA COLLECTOR

Matt Henzel on his love for Nintendo's portable

When did you start collecting GBA games?

That would have been June 2001, (when it was released here in the USA). I bought the original GBA along with the launch titles: *Super Mario Advance*, *Castlevania: Circle Of The Moon*, *F-Zero: Maximum Velocity*, *Konami Krazy Racers*, and *Tony Hawk Pro Skater 2*.

What is it that you like about the system?

It was one of the last mostly pure, 2D pixel art-based systems to come out. I always thought of it as a successor, of sorts, to the SNES.

What's the rarest game you own?

I'd say probably *Castlevania: Aria Of Sorrow* or *Legend Of Zelda: The Minish Cap* would be the rarest ones I own. I also have both of those factory sealed as well since I ended up playing extra loose copies.

What one game sums up the system and why?

Metroid: Zero Mission. It was an amazing port/remaster of the NES original. It was a perfect choice for the GBA with its many Save Rooms. This allowed for more flexible playtime.

Are there any titles you're still looking for?

Sure. I have a handful of games that I'd still like to get some day. Some of them, such as *Ninja 5-0*, or *Pocky & Rocky W/Becky*, with their $300-ish CIB value, I'll likely never get. The ones I am still looking to buy though are: *Double Dragon Advance*, *Final Fight One*, *Pinball Of The Dead*, *River City Ransom EX* and *Contra Advance*.

Why do you think the system remains so popular?

I believe it's due to the GBA having a solid catalogue of games, as well as many of the games being of the hand-drawn pixel variety. It's timeless, and that style just ages so much better than polygons, at least in my opinion. The fact that Nintendo also gave the DS and DS Lite systems full backwards GBA compatibility also helped it find another generation of gamers.

What's your favourite version of the GBA?

I prefer the ergonomics of the original launch model, but unless you are playing under direct sunlight it can be very hard to see. The back-lit SP AGS-101 model is so much nicer. So my answer would be an original 2001 model GBA retrofitted with an AGS-101 LCD screen. I also didn't care for how Nintendo removed the 3.5mm headphone jack on the SP. The fact that the original GBA uses two AA batteries also future proofs it a bit as well.

What advice would you give to anyone starting their own collection?

If they don't already have a GBA system I would highly suggest the original model modified with an AGS-101 screen. This would cover the full line of Game Boy games (GB-GBC-GBA). It might also be a good idea to stick to collecting loose GBA cartridges. The CIB versions of many are getting quite pricey lately.



KNOW YOUR GBA

Nintendo released several iterations of its popular portable…

GAME BOY ADVANCE



This is the original GBA, which was released in 2001. It boasts a 2.9" screen and powers off 2x AA batteries. It's extremely comfortable to hold but is let down by the lack of a backlight, which makes games like *Castlevania: Circle Of The Moon* very difficult to play. It's compatible with all Game Boy and Game Boy Color games.

GAME BOY ADVANCE SP



Nintendo shrunk everything down for the SP, introducing a much-needed backlight and a clamshell design that helped protect the screen. It uses a rechargeable battery and came in an insane range of colours and special editions. Annoyingly, it loses the headphone jack, so needed a separate adaptor. A later AGS-101 version features a far better screen and is now highly collectible.

GAME BOY MICRO



Nintendo's final revision was released after the Nintendo DS and is absolutely tiny. It boasts a razor-sharp screen, which is just 2" in length and came with a removable faceplate, which could be easily replaced. It's the only model to not be compatible with Game Boy and Game Boy Color games.

GAME BOY PLAYER



This interesting device was designed to sit under the GameCube, allowing you to play your GBA games on a big screen. Compatibility for certain games isn't the best (good luck completing motion-based games like *Yoshi's Universal Gravitation* or *Boktai*) and the screen resolution is a little fuzzy, but it still works surprisingly well.





DOUBLE DRAGON ADVANCE 2003

MILLION

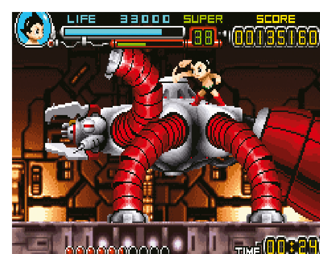
This satisfying scrolling fighter might be short, but offers plenty of bang for your buck. It's effectively an enhanced remake of the original 1987 arcade game, but features additional special moves from later games in the series. It also adds four additional stages (including a chaotic battle atop a moving truck) as well as an option to play as both brothers, switching between them at will.

MARIO & LUIGI: SUPERSTAR SAGA 2003

ALPHADREAM

This entertaining RPG is unusual in that you control both Mario and Luigi simultaneously. Teaming them up not only allows them to navigate new areas of the Beanbean Kingdom, but also allows them to combine attacks throughout the game's satisfying battles. Rich in humour and with an interesting array of new characters, the game spawned numerous sequels and was recently remade for the 3DS.





ASTRO BOY: OMEGA FACTOR 2003

TREASURE, HITMAKER

Designed to tie in with the 2004 US TV series, Treasure's game turned out to be one of the best action games on the system. A true love letter to the popular Japanese manga, it features numerous plotlines and characters from the long-running series and is chock-full of action. It's not the easiest of games, but as with Treasure's *Alien Soldier*, perseverance reaps its own rewards and it soon opens up as you unlock Astro Boy's numerous abilities.

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: THE MINISH CAP 2004

CAPCOM, FLAGSHIP

The second Zelda game to grace the GBA is a prequel to *Four Swords*, which was bundled with the GBA port of *A Link To The Past*. It introduces Ezlo, a bizarre talking cap and adds several new items for Link to use, including Mole Mitts (which enable Link to dig in certain areas) and the enemy sucking Gust Jar. Sadly, it was the last Zelda game Flag Ship was involved in.








MARIO VS DONKEY KONG 2004

NINTENDO SOFTWARE TECHNOLOGY

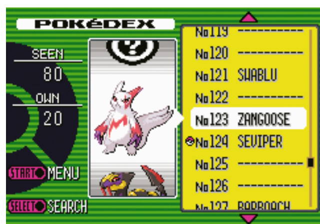
Interestingly, this is the only game in the Mario Vs Donkey Kong series where you actually control Mario. The vast majority of stages require you to rescue a clockwork Mario by collecting a key and reaching a locked door, then rescuing a toy Mario. Once all Marios are collected you must guide them to safety and then battle Donkey Kong. Numerous sequels have appeared and are far more puzzle-based.




METROID: ZERO MISSION 2004

NINTENDO R&D1

Zero Mission isn't a brand new game, but instead an enhanced remake of the original NES game, vastly updating both the graphics and mechanics. The end result is something that feels familiar, but adds more than enough new mechanics and weapons (as well as a completely new chapter) to ensure that even Metroid veterans will receive a challenge as well as plenty of surprises.





POKÉMON EMERALD 2004

GAME FREAK

This is effectively an update of *Ruby* and *Sapphire* with numerous tweaks and updates. One of the biggest additions is Battle Frontier, which adds a whole new island you can travel to once the Elite Four have been beaten. You can also link up for trading and battles with *Pokémon FireRed* and *LeafGreen*.




RACING GEARS ADVANCE 2004

ORBITAL MEDIA

This challenging and entertaining racer basically plays like a cross between *Micro Machines* and *Rock 'N Roll Racing*. It's great fun to play thanks to incredibly tight controls and extremely inventive track designs that hide lots of clever shortcuts. There's a multiplayer option, too, allowing up to four friends to race each other. Just be aware that it's rising in price now.

DK: KING OF SWING 2005

PAON

This weird Donkey Kong offshoot is surprisingly fun and has elements of old NES classic, *Clu Clu Land* to it. The idea of each stage is to swing around the levels, grabbing handy pegs (using the L and R buttons) and collecting bananas as you go. It's great fun and while the main game is relatively short there are lots of additional modes, including races and death matches. The DS received a sequel, DK Jungle Climber in 2007.





GUNSTAR SUPER HEROES 2005

TREASURE

While it's not quite as good as the original Mega Drive classic, Treasure's sequel comes very, very close. It's yet another tour de force from the developer, pushing the limits of Nintendo's machine, whilst introducing lots of lovely references to past Sega games, including *After Burner* and *Flicky*. A challenging run-and-gun with truly spectacular boss battles.

DRILL DOZER 2005

GAME FREAK

This excellent action game is another late GBA release, which is slowly rising in price. Taking control of Jill and her Drill Dozer you must make inventive use of your drill to navigate your way through the cleverly-designed levels. There are some great boss battles to take part in while the clever use of force feedback adds to the game's immersion.





RHYTHM TENGOKU 2006

NINTENDO SPD

This quirky rhythm action game was the last official release from Nintendo and shares similarities with the WarioWare games. Like WarioWare there are lots of bizarre minigames to take part in, but they're all set to the timing of beats and music, meaning you'll need a good ear as well as good reflexes to best them. Despite the language barrier it's very easy to understand.




THE LEGEND OF SPYRO: THE ETERNAL NIGHT 2007

AMAZE ENTERTAINMENT

The final official European GBA release is a rather excellent Metroidvania effort and completely standalone to the other available versions. It features an impressively complex combat system, satisfying boss encounters and extremely clever gameplay design. Spyro and the various enemies are beautifully animated and it's only really let down by its weak narrative. A fitting European swansong for the system.



BEHIND THE SCENES

THE THING

How this classic movie adaptation attempted to build a sequel to John Carpenter's landmark horror experience



Released: 2002
Format: Playstation 2, Xbox, PC
Publisher: Black Label Games
Key Staff: Andrew Curtis (Lead Designer) Diarmid Campbell (Lead Programmer)

IN 1982, HORROR MASTER JOHN CARPENTER, BEST KNOWN FOR FILMS LIKE HALLOWEEN, THEY LIVE, BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE CHINA AND ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK, RELEASED THE THING TO A MOSTLY NEGATIVE CRITICAL REACTION. Seeing it as little more than a cheap vehicle to showcase blood, guts and gore, it wasn't until after its initial release and into the Nineties that it started to gain traction and acclaim. Now seen as one of the – if not *the* greatest – horror films ever made, it's considered a classic that has found both its audience and well-deserved praise. Based on John W Campbell Jr's 1938 novella *Who Goes There?*, *The Thing* spawned a novelisation, a comic adaptation, a board game and a prequel film in 2011. However, one overlooked entry into the franchise is the 2002 videogame, simply named *The Thing*. Treading the line between familiarity and giving the franchise new and interesting possibilities, it did what most offshoots of the franchise were afraid to do with the acclaimed series: continue it.

For the uninitiated in the horror masterwork, the film of *The Thing* follows a research team in Antarctica that becomes the prey of an alien creature, one that can perfectly replicate whatever organism it comes into contact with. Never seen in its original form, the alien begins to take the guise of various members of the research team. Alone and isolated in the depths of nowhere, the film plays into the paranoia and mistrust that begins to brew amid the researchers, all the while the alien picks them off one by one.

IT DID WHAT MOST OFF-SHOOTS OF THE FRANCHISE WERE AFRAID TO DO WITH THE ACCLAIMED SERIES: CONTINUE IT

The game picks up shortly after the climatic events of the film. Planned to be a direct sequel from the outset and inspired by James Cameron's *Aliens*, it focuses on a team of US Special Forces that are sent to investigate what occurred at Outpost 31, the setting of Carpenter's original film. The player takes the role of Captain JF Blake. It doesn't take long before communications are down and the alien begins replicating Blake's team, ultimately leading to a title that offers up action, a tense atmosphere and a team-management system that will have the player second guessing the very people who fight alongside them.



Thin-skinned members of your squad won't be able to deal with gruesome scenes. Get them away from the area before they have a breakdown.



The alien can take many different forms, sometimes looking like a mish-mash of different creatures and people.

Long before working on *The Thing*, most of the team at Computer Artworks were massive fans of the original film. As Diarmid Campbell, lead programmer on the project explains, "I probably first saw it when I was about 12 – it was on TV, and it scared the shit out of me! Everyone was talking about it at school. Though I didn't really appreciate its brilliance until I started working on the game, and so watched the film again as an adult. The setting is open and desolate, but no one can escape. Everyone becomes totally paranoid, and everyone deals with it in their own way. Add to that the slowly picking off of each character one by one, and you get this countdown feeling – it's a brilliant piece of filmmaking! The task of creating a game sequel was both daunting and exciting. The difficulty was that the film is character driven (rather than action driven), but in games, the player typically does actions, so trying to translate the psychological elements into systems you can play was always going to be difficult."

Lead designer Andrew Curtis echoes Campbell's praise for the film. "It has a brilliant cast, haunting music and great tension in a gripping scenario with nowhere to run – and not forgetting some of the best physical special effects in the history of cinema. We saw making the game as a great opportunity for a relatively unknown studio, and were so full of excitement we didn't have time to be troubled by the task ahead."

In speaking about how the team landed the IP for *The Thing*, Curtis says, "We were approached by Universal Interactive, who already had the rights to the IP. The publisher Black Label Games was specifically created by Universal Interactive to avoid a situation where titles like Crash Bandicoot and Spyro The Dragon were published under the same label as a horror game about a shape-changing alien flesh monster."

With the IP in place, the team began work on their ambitious continuation of the famed horror film. However, one important piece of *The Thing* puzzle would be missing from this game. As Curtis explains, "John Carpenter didn't seem very interested in videogames, and I think he was too distracted with his film *Ghosts Of Mars*. He did agree to do a signing at E3 to help promote the game, and let us use his likeness for the character Dr Shaun Faraday in the game. Everyone working on the game loved John, but he's definitely not a gamer."

WHAT THEY SAID…

The Thing merely introduces a whole host of baffling quirks of its own, and manages to make you long for Capcom's far more polished approach

Eurogamer, 2003

This love and appreciation the developers had for Carpenter's film is very much evident within the game. From the opening levels that take place at Outpost 31 and the Norwegian station that features such recognisable film elements as the frozen body of Childs, the spacecraft that was being built by the Blair version of the alien, and the frozen body of the Norwegian researcher that slashed his wrists and throat before the alien could take him, to being able to listen to MacReady's tapes, there's a level of authenticity that is a true love letter to what came before it. However, once the player gets past these nods to the original film, the game begins to carve out its own place within the series, and does so brilliantly.

Though *The Thing* does admittedly take a safe route with its third-person survival horror approach in terms of combat and exploration, Computer Artworks was keen to replicate what the film nailed so perfectly. Curtis explains, "Even though the game moved more towards action horror, we didn't ever want the player to feel safe. At its core the game is about paranoia and tension; the feeling that at any moment you could be ambushed by a twisted alien mutation, or an ally could attempt to kill and assimilate you."

Despite its surface level of familiarity, with a whole host of titles released around the same time, there are three main elements that set it apart from anything that has come before it. The game elements that were intended to be game changing were the User Interface, the Fear/Trust System and the Infection System. As head of the Beta team that has been sent to Outpost 31 to investigate, the player at all times has one to three additional soldiers under their command. Those under the command of the player fall under one of three potential classes: soldier, medic and engineer. Each class serves a distinct purpose during the game, and the player needs to know when and how to use them. From instructing engineers to fix a broken keypad in order to advance through a door to having your medic patch you up after a gruelling battle with an enemy, properly interacting with your squad is the key to survival in *The Thing*.





Each member of your squad at any one time serve a specific purpose, and can ultimately do things that the player simply cannot.

THE OTHER MAIN CONSIDERATION WAS MANAGING WHAT HORRORS YOU EXPOSED SQUAD MEMBERS TO, AS THOSE OF A WEAKER DISPOSITION WOULD LOSE THEIR MINDS AND GO GUN CRAZY OR COMMIT SUICIDE



If you're not careful you may get lost in the snow fields in the game. Navigate them by using the various flares and lights that link various points of interest together.

However, as Campbell explains, creating a user interface to match the team's vision didn't work out as well as they expected, "Originally, the goal was to not have any HUD-type overlay showing the fear/trust values, but to try and communicate everything using animations. However, this was not possible, so we ended up having trust and fear meters for each character that showed up when you enter Interaction mode. The other difficulty was a UI that let you interact with your team mates in the myriad ways the designers wanted. Send an engineer to fix something, medic to heal someone, ask for a weapon, offer a weapon, swap a weapon, heal someone yourself, follow me, stay there etc. On top of this, you sometimes could not perform an action, and we had to communicate why – did you not have the right objects, did your NPC not trust you, was he paralysed with fear? We went through about four fully implemented iterations of the UI before settling on the one we ended

up with. It was still rightly criticised for being too complex, but I think it was about as simple as it could be given the complexity of the underlying systems. To make it simpler would have required a redesign of too many other game design systems, and that would have meant redesigning many levels, and there was no time to do that."

The Fear/Trust System was at the heart of *The Thing* experience. Much like the film itself, fear and paranoia runs rampant, which leads to the player constantly having to assess their squad's mental stability and chances that they are the alien. Curtis delves into the Fear/Trust System: "Players had to make decisions about how to arm and manage a squad mate who could potentially turn on them. These kinds of actions could lower their trust in you, eventually causing them to take you down. There were even things in the game that players never saw. My favourite was if you just let your squad take out the enemy and you held back, they would suspect you were infected. The other main consideration was managing what horrors you exposed squad members to, as those of a weaker disposition would lose their minds and go gun crazy or commit suicide. I think we pulled this off well. From speaking to fans of the game, they enjoy telling stories of great paranoia."

Topping off the trio of ambitious ideas the team planned for the game was the Infection System. As the entire story of *The Thing* revolves around an alien creature that infects humans and can perfectly replicate them, the game needed a robust system in place to pull this off. However, what started out as a dynamic system that sounds impressive even by

THE CANCELLED SEQUEL

THE THING 2 PROMISED TO MAKE GOOD ON THE PROMISES OF THE ORIGINAL.

Due to the critical and commercial success of *The Thing*, a sequel was on the cards, but despite already starting production, Computer Artworks entered receivership in October 2003, killing the project. *The Thing 2*, taking place right after the ending of the previous game that revealed a surprise appearance by movie protagonist MacReady, would focus on him and Blake trying to survive in a number of different environments, including a small town and an oil rig. The team at Computer Artworks intended to deliver upon the promises made by the previous game, and as Campbell points out, a large part of this was focused on rebuilding and perfecting the UI, Infection System and Fear/Trust game mechanics.

"We made a prototype where one random character starts off infected in a level and then when they are alone they infect another. Each time a new character was infected a bone-chilling wail would echo over the ice. We still hadn't solved the problem of how to get that to work with a story, but I think it could have been done by having different types of levels, some which drive the story, others that were more dynamic. In terms of a trust system where NPCs had trust in each other, we made some progress on this. It made for a more interesting system with emergent behaviour – eg help one NPC and all the others who trust him, then start to trust you, but those that did not become your enemy."





Though some versions of the alien are easy to dispatch, other more beefier transformations will demand that the player has sufficient fire-power at their disposal.



Keeping a close eye on your team members always puts you on edge. They could turn at any moment, so it's best to keep your flamethrower at the ready.

THE CHILDS AND MACREADY MYSTERY



What happened after the film's iconic ending?

AT THE END of the film, the characters of Childs and MacReady are the sole survivors, but it ends on an ambiguous note as to whether they're both human or not. Childs' body can be found in the game, but MacCready is nowhere to be seen. As to how he envisioned what happened after the credits rolled on the film, Curtis says, "We discussed carrying forward the Childs/MacReady scene from the film, but decided its ambiguity was precious to the fans, so we didn't want to mess with it. We talked briefly about one aspect of the final scene – not being able to see Childs' breath, which could indicate Childs was infected – but didn't develop it. I like to think after the final scene they helped each other survive up to the point MacReady had to make a tough decision."



During the game the player can find the frozen body of Childs, who was played by Keith David in the film. The bottle of whiskey he shared with MacReady is still beside him.



The clumsy boss battles in *The Thing* are clearly the game's weakest element. They are few and far between, but sadly break the excellent sense of tension the game dishes out.

today's standards ended up being something that was not as realised as any of the developers had initially hoped. Curtis explains the downgrade in the Infection System: "The Infection System was originally implemented as a dynamic system. There were a lot of factors determining whether a squad mate could become infected, namely a percentage chance when being attacked, and also when they were left alone with an infected squad mate. This worked great for us in the early days of the project, but when we got the PS2 dev kits we quickly realised it would be difficult to collect a large team over time due to limitations in rendering lots of characters on screen. We added something we called 'infection triggers' eventually to slim down the squad numbers at set points in the game. The result was not so much a missed opportunity or worthy compromise, but more a case of getting away with it, as the majority of player were unaware of the triggers."

Campbell gives his take on the stripped-down system that made it into the finished version of the game: "I'd probably describe it as a reasonable first stab at it, but it is clearly quite flawed. During development there was this constant tension between infection as a dynamic system that players could interact with – e.g. perform blood tests – and a story-driven game where big set piece burst outs or deaths could make a cinematic event. The two are not easy bedfellows, and we never had a clear strategy on how to resolve this. We just sort of muddled through and reached a case-by-case compromise in the end, which for most players worked well, but some would have felt cheated. I think a game system based on these concepts could be made that was much better than what we created, but we simply didn't have the time to iterate on it enough."

The question remains: does *The Thing* live up to the film that spawned it? Both critically and commercially the game was a hit, but Campbell and Curtis have a difference of opinion on whether their game was a worthy follow-up. Campbell explains his views on the title in saying, "I am immensely proud of the game. It was extremely innovative, and I think it holds up well against other games. I feel we also captured much of what was good about the film, especially the atmosphere. But *The Thing* is such a great movie that for a game to live up to it? Well... it would have to be a fucking amazing game! We were a pretty inexperienced team working on the

Later in the game, you'll find yourself going up against human foes. They prevent the alien from being over-used as the game's only enemy.



> A GAMING EVOLUTION

The Terminator 2049 > The Thing > Ghostbusters: The Video Game



The Terminator 2049 expanded upon the war against the machines, only briefly depicted in the series up until then.



Taking place two years after *Ghostbusters 2*, this is, according to Dan Aykroyd, "essentially the third movie".



game, and we completed the game in about two years – I think we were about 3-6 months later than we originally estimated. We tried to do far too many new and complex things at the same time within a very constrained development timeline. All these complexities multiplied, making the whole project impossible to predict and schedule accurately. Many systems had to be rewritten when it transpired that they didn't play nicely with other systems. We initially totally overestimated what the PS2 graphics would be capable of because of some wishful thinking and taking Sony's marketing hype too literally. The whole team was burnt out by the end but, as I say, we were young and inexperienced, and it created a great sense of camaraderie. I feel a special bond with everyone I worked with on that project."

FOR ME, THE WHOLE PROJECT FELT LIKE FIGHTING THROUGH A BLIZZARD WITH A VAGUE IDEA OF WHERE WE WERE HEADING, BUT CONTINUOUSLY MEETING HUGE OBSTACLES THAT HAD TO BE OVERCOME

Curtis, on the other hand, views the game in a slightly more positive light. "I think we struck a good balance between the gameplay functions players expected at the time and the tension from the film. I'm really proud of the Fear/Trust and Infections System, and I believe we delivered on the paranoia we wanted players to feel. There was real depth in the AI that governed the squad, and it resulted in some crazy situations that surprised even us. Making a game attached to a film licence historically sucked [the exceptions at the time being *GoldenEye* and *The Chronicles Of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay*], but as there was no immovable deadline tied to a cinema release, and Universal/Black Label were really supportive of the things we wanted to do, it was given the space it needed. We even received an E3 award for best use of a movie licence, which was fantastic."

From creating a cross-platform engine in tandem with the actual game, shooting for brazen new ideas and concepts that might not fully work out, pushing past the expected completion schedule, all the while following up a beloved and highly regarded horror film, *The Thing* followed in line with John Carpenter's film in that it was birthed in a turbulent environment. While fans, and even Computer Artworks, are divided as to whether it is a worthy successor to the film, it tried the impossible. It may not have been the game it attempted to be, but what was released is a great title that makes players fear the very teammates who have their back, all the while forcing them to keep their flamethrower at the ready. Closing the book on *The Thing*, Campbell sums up his thoughts with a rather apt analogy. "For me, the whole project felt like fighting through a blizzard with a vague idea of where we were heading, but continuously meeting huge obstacles that had to be overcome. In this context it is hard to distinguish between a set back and just the way things were."

WHAT THEY SAID…

The mix of gameplay elements really helps to keep the game interesting the whole way through, since at just about every turn the game asks you to do something that you haven't done before

GamePro, 1994



During the player's helicopter escape at the end of the game, the pilot is revealed to be RJ MacReady, the protagonist of the original film.







The final boss goes for broke and pits you against a creature bigger than anything seen before, or since, in the franchise.





DREW KARPYSHYN

WRITER ON (AMONG OTHERS) *BALDUR'S GATE 2*, *NEVERWINTER NIGHTS*, *KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC* AND *MASS EFFECT*, RECALLS WORKING WITH JAMES OHLEN

"■■■ James is a master of game design and understanding the mechanics of 'fun'. But he also has a deep passion for characters and story. Combine that with an encyclopaedic knowledge of *D&D*, *Star Wars* and comics in general, and you basically have the ultimate RPG nerd – and the perfect person to lead a project like *Baldur's Gate*."

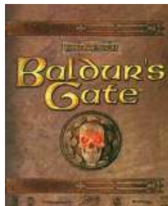




INTERVIEW
JAMES OHLEN

In a 20-year plus career, James Ohlen has been involved in many of the iconic games to come from legendary developer BioWare. On the eve of his retirement, **games**™ caught up with him to discuss Baldur's Gate and beyond

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Baldur's Gate [1998]
Lead Designer



Neverwinter Nights [2002]
Designer



Dragon Age: Origins [2009]
Lead Designer

How did you start work at BioWare?
Myself and this group of friends were the first employees at BioWare. We all lived in this small town called Grande Prairie, including Cameron Topher, who now heads up Beamdog. We were all into games, so we drove down to Edmonton, and they interviewed us, and told us they were working on a *Dungeons & Dragons* game, but they didn't know what it was going to be yet. There were six of us and we kinda doubled the size of the company.

Presumably you were keen on this, being a huge *D&D* fan?
Oh yeah. *D&D* has been in my life since I was 11-years old, so it was a chance for me to present what I thought would be a great *D&D*-style RPG. BioWare was negotiating with Interplay, who wanted a *D&D* videogame, and Scott Greig had this engine it was using for a game called *Battleground Infinity*. *Shattered Steel* [BioWare's first release] was made by two brothers in Calgary; BioWare negotiated the contract for it with Interplay. So *Baldur's Gate* was to be the first game headed up by classic BioWare, although its original title was *Iron Throne*. There were a lot of toilet jokes about that, so I think it was Brian Fargo [Interplay boss] that came up with the new name. I can't remember how it happened, but the city had a cool name so it seemed as good a name as any.

How did you become lead designer on *Baldur's Gate*?

D&D HAS BEEN IN MY LIFE SINCE I WAS 11-YEARS OLD

I decided I was gonna be the designer, and went away and did all the work. They said 'you're obviously the lead designer then!' Yay! I always say, if you're passionate about something, pursue that.

It must have been a dream come true – but what was it actually like working on *Baldur's Gate*?
From 1996 to 2000 I slept at work. I was famous as the only person who used the shower at BioWare. Also, none of us had made a videogame before so there was a lot of collaboration going on. Between *Baldur's Gate* and *Baldur's Gate 2*, it was just a blur. I can't even remember the apartment I was living in.

What do you think made *Baldur's Gate* such a success?
It gave people something they hadn't had before. You felt like it was this huge open world, with an epic storyline, but it didn't take away the player agency.

After the add-on *Tales Of The Sword Coast*, it was straight back to it with *Baldur's Gate 2* and a modified Infinity engine…
The plan with the sequel was to give fans everything they loved about *D&D* in one single game. And personally my plan was also to beat Squaresoft and Final Fantasy. After *Baldur's Gate*, I discovered *Final Fantasy VII*, and realised our characters weren't really as well developed as the Final Fantasy

characters. As much as people liked them, ours were essentially one-dimensional; they had interesting things to say, but beyond that they didn't have a storyline. The Final Fantasy characters had romances and real relationships, so that was very inspirational for *Baldur's Gate 2*.

After another expansion, *Throne Of Bhaal*, it was onto the next level of RPG with *Neverwinter Nights*, which wasn't quite as well received as the *Baldur's Gate* games.

Neverwinter was our first 3D role-playing game and like any production, it had lots of ups and downs. I wasn't actually the designer at the start, but it was overrunning and Trent [Oster], who was the executive producer, said I needed to come in and take the design leadership on it. And it wasn't the most fun.

What made it such a difficult time?

Well, it was during the time when Interplay was going under, and Ray [Muzyka] and Greg [Zeshuk, two of BioWare's founders] were trying to figure out how to move *Neverwinter Nights* from Interplay to Infogrames/Atari. Everyone at the studio knew it was a precarious situation, so we tried to focus on just getting the campaign done. Also, *Neverwinter* was something completely different, as it was about the toolset, and people actually creating multiplayer games. Marc Holmes was the art director and he had it worst. He had to figure out what art could work that could be taken apart and then reconstructed. It wasn't just that you could create beautiful art, it had to work within the toolset. It was a learning experience, and as the design director, I used it to hire some of the best designers that the company could get, and was able to actually test people's skills within a toolset, so instead of them telling us, we could actually see that they could really design levels, for example. It was our most powerful hiring tool for six of seven years.

NEVERWINTER WAS OUR FIRST 3D ROLE-PLAYING GAME AND LIKE ANY PRODUCTION, IT HAD LOTS OF UPS AND DOWNS

With all these hirings, how had your own role developed?

By *Neverwinter Nights*, BioWare was still a pretty small company, and I was still lead designer and design director, essentially managing the design department across the studio. But that soon started to change, and as we did more games, I started to focus more on the design director role.

Of course, BioWare expanded into consoles next with *Jade Empire* and *Knights Of The Old Republic*.

I didn't work much on *Jade Empire*, as my role was administrative as director of design. But I worked on *KOTOR*, and was game director on that project. It came out on the Xbox first, but we developed the Xbox and PC versions simultaneously. It turned out better than I expected. When I get to the end of the production of any game where I am creative director/lead designer I have a very hard time being able to judge how good it is, mostly because I've played it so many times, and at so many different stages, that it's difficult for me to even view it as a game.

As we move into the mid-2000s, BioWare itself began to go through a few big changes. What was this time like?

Around that time, we got bought out twice. Firstly, by Elevation Partners, which was run by John Riccitiello and Bono of U2 was a major investor. Our boss was Bono! Then, Electronic Arts bought BioWare/Pandemic from Elevation in 2008. It was a definitely a big change and as you get to certain thresholds of the number of people employed, your culture changes. You have a different relationship with people as the studio gets bigger.

The latter half of this decade saw two huge new BioWare franchises appear. How were you involved in those?

Dragon Age was basically *Baldur's Gate* on console. As a *D&D* fan, I said we couldn't give up on it, so proposed we do our own version of *D&D*. *Mass Effect* I was involved in at the beginning with the dialogue wheel, my one and only patent for BioWare. We had decided we were going to patent a lot of things, with the strategy, I guess, that the company was more valuable the more patents it had. But other than that, *Mass Effect* was mostly the *KOTOR* team, and my right-hand man on that, Preston Watamaniuk, became the lead design for *Mass Effect* as I started up *Dragon's Age Origins*.

BioWare opened a new studio in 2006, specifically to begin work on the MMO *Star Wars: The Old Republic*.

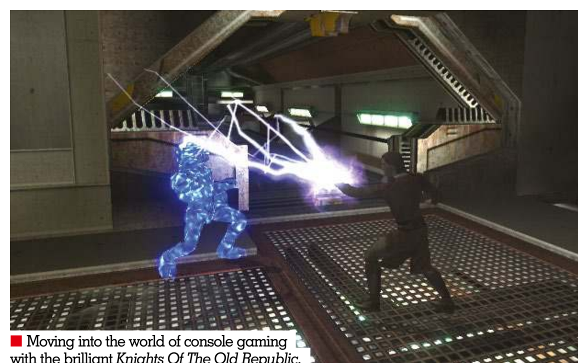
I worked on *Origins* for two years before Ray and Greg asked me to go down to the studio in Austin and help set up *The Old Republic*. It was only supposed to be for a year, but I'm still here…and the advice I always give to people is to always jump at opportunities. It didn't take me long to think, hey, I get to go to a new country and work on something completely different.



Beamdog's enhanced version of *Baldur's Gate*.

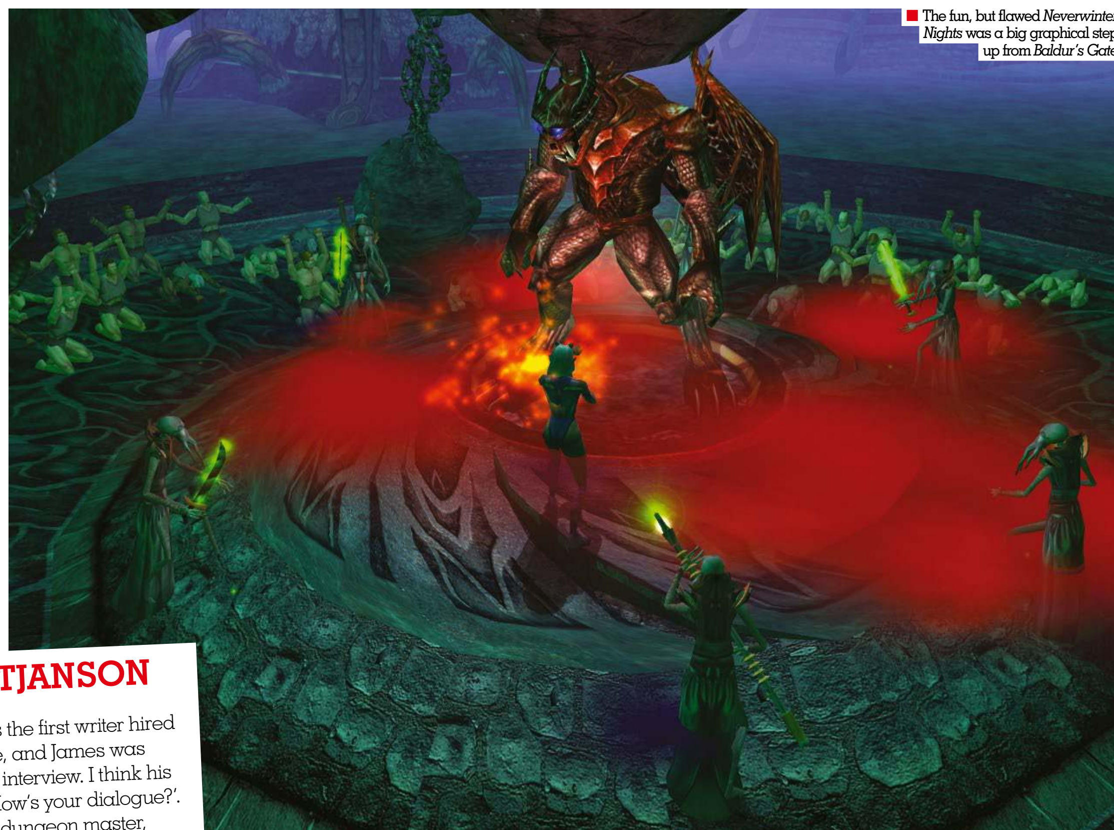

With *D&D* no longer an option, Ohlen and BioWare created its own fantasy world in *Dragon Age*.


Better than the original? The fantastic *Baldur's Gate 2: Shadows Of Amn*.


Moving into the world of console gaming with the brilliant *Knights Of The Old Republic*.







The fun, but flawed *Neverwinter Nights* was a big graphical step up from *Baldur's Gate*

LUKE KRISTJANSON
BIOWARE WRITER

"I was the first writer hired at BioWare, and James was part of the interview. I think his first question was 'How's your dialogue?'. He was a long-time dungeon master, and he knew the appeal of *D&D* wasn't just the ruleset. Roleplaying lives and dies on the characters in the world, and the characters you play. That's what we wanted to capture [with *Baldur's Gate*], and it was a lot of fun figuring that out with him. Lots of late nights and questionable pizza."



The open world nature of *Baldur's Gate*, before open world was even a thing, is demonstrated in this map.



Then there was a change of direction next for BioWare Austin with the ultimately doomed *Shadow Realms*.
The Old Republic was launched in 2011, and I was focused on the live service for most of 2012. Then, for the studio's health, we needed to work on something that was not *Star Wars* related. If a studio becomes focused on one game or IP, it becomes difficult to do anything else. So we started up *Shadow Realms*, which was ostensibly to keep our top talent working on something new.

But things didn't turn out well for *Shadow Realms*, did they?
For a while, Electronic Arts wanted to do PC free-to-play, but then the game moved away from that. And then *Shadow Realms* was no longer a part of the strategy and got cancelled. I'd been on other projects that had been cancelled, but it was devastating for a lot of people when that happened. But for me, I was more disappointed because after *Shadow Realms*, we basically went to work on *Mass Effect Andromeda*, but all the studios were affected as they had all been working on *Shadow Realms* at that time.

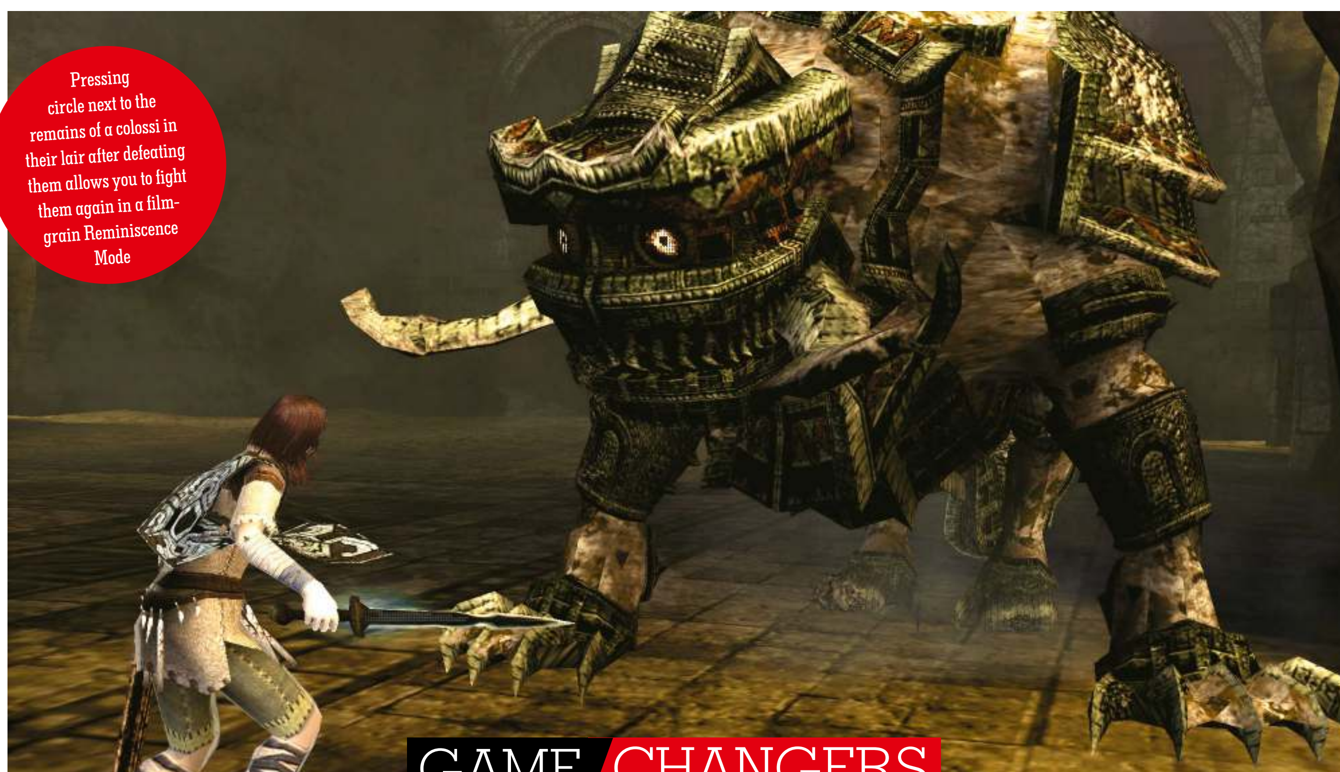
Your last work at BioWare was on the upcoming *Anthem*. What was your role there, and how do you think the game is shaping up?
I was narrative director on *Anthem* for around six months. It's looking amazing; beautiful, plays great, and has some of the most compelling characters we've done. I think people are going to love it!

What brought about your decision to retire from BioWare?
Working on *Anthem* kick-started my 'I miss this stuff' feeling. I came to the realisation, especially with the way that triple-A games are going, that there are fewer and fewer of them, and if you want to be involved at a creative level – like my first decade at BioWare – then it's gotta be a start-up or something smaller. So what I'm working on now is a *D&D* campaign book, based on the fifth edition, which is the most successful since the first, and something similar to *Baldur's Gate 1* and *2*. The content is amazing, and I'm working with people all over the world, making it feel like a different version of the old days, except no tight budget and no technological restrictions.

With over 20 years at BioWare, helping to create some amazing games, what was your favourite period?
My favourite period was probably from 1997 to 2003. During these six years I was the lead designer on *Baldur's Gate*, *Baldur's Gate 2*, *Neverwinter Nights* and *KOTOR*. I was working 100 hour weeks, but it didn't ever feel like work.

You can keep track of James Ohlen's new *D&D* adventure, *Odyssey Of The Dragonlords*, at **www.arcanumworlds.com**





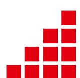
Pressing circle next to the remains of a colossi in their lair after defeating them allows you to fight them again in a film-grain Reminiscence Mode

GAME CHANGERS

SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

Developer: Team Ico **Publisher:** Sony **Released:** 2005 **System:** PS2

This monumental game was a massive leap forward for game design, narrative style and structure. We reflect on the impact this giant of gaming history brought about



WE TEND TO spend a lot of time reflecting on and praising the spectacle of *Shadow Of The Colossus* as well as its narrative, design and thematic choices, but perhaps we ought to consider the technical challenges and advancements it made too. When Fumito Ueda looked to follow up on *Ico*, he wasn't interested in making a direct sequel or repeating what he had done before. He looked to push the PS2 harder and create something that, for all of its scale and fantasy, was rooted in realism and maintained the illusion as much as possible. The mechanics and animations of the game needed to complement the immersion of the world as much as possible, and that wasn't easy.

THE TECHNICAL CHALLENGES OF SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS WERE NUMEROUS AND REALLY QUITE SPECIFIC TO THE UNIQUE FEATURES THE EXPERIENCE FINALLY OFFERED

The task was made all the more demanding (and the results all the more remarkable) with a team of just 35 artists and programmers working on *Shadow Of The Colossus*. This was a lot more people than worked on *Ico*, we should mention, but still a rather small team by modern standards. Given the scale of the game world, not to mention the scale of the colossi, it's really quite incredible how much it managed to achieve with so limited a team, albeit with plenty of development time between projects to make it all happen.

THE FALLEN MIGHTY

| SOME OF OUR FAVES FROM THE COTERIE OF COLOSSI



GAIUS

★ It was only the third colossus we got to meet, but Gaius really sums up wonderfully all of the best elements of what conquering these giant creatures was about. The scale of it, embellished by standing on its own platform, running up its stone sword and climbing to its head, was a fantastic journey.



AVION

★ Our first flying adversary and quite a fun riddle to solve. Working out how best to get on Avion was the biggest challenge, but staying attached to one of the smallest colossi as it angled itself into turns and flew around its enclosure was a big part of the experience too.



PHALANX

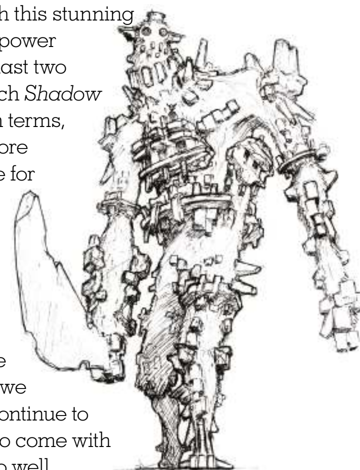
★ The second flying colossi, and what an incredible thing it was to behold. The desert location is stunning and the structure of the fight even more enjoyable as you first bring it closer to the ground and then begin the process of boarding and traversing it to bring it down.

The technical challenges of *Shadow Of The Colossus* were numerous and really quite specific to the unique features the experience finally offered. Take, for example, what the team called organic collision deformation. This was essentially a cover-all term for how Wander interacted with the colossi: how he was able to grab onto them, climb them in a dynamic way and also walk on them when the body part he's standing on is in a more or less horizontal position. When you think about it, that really is quite a remarkable element to the game, as each boss is supposed to be its own level in some ways. They are dynamic platforms that move and react, but that also needed to open up possibilities for Wander to navigate them even more. We had really never seen anything quite like that before, so Team Ico had to come up with its own technical solutions for that to work, and we have to say it absolutely nailed it. The way you solve the puzzle of the colossi is a major part of the *Shadow Of The Colossus* experience, and the reality of these creatures is greatly enhanced by the physics of how you climb them.

The second challenge was identified as player dynamics and reactions, which was how Wander, once on a colossus, would react to being on them and behave in unison with their movements or actions. These moving levels are obviously trying to shake him off, they might be flying through the air and making sharp turns. To what degree should he be flung around by these movements? When does gravity work in his favour and when does it work against him? The introduction of the stamina bar and how it recharged when Wander is able to stand without aid added to the tension and risk/reward mechanics that these questions ultimately created. As he grabs fur he can be swung around, and he needs to naturally find his balance before progressing. It's the intuitiveness of what Team Ico created in these moments that helps to make the colossi more believable.

One of the more commonly complimented smaller elements of the game was the movement and animation of Agro, Wanders horse and faithful companion. Agro was unlike anything most of us had ever experienced from a companion animal in a videogame before, with a sense of her own agency. You don't control Agro; you can only encourage and guide her. An extension of this was what Team Ico called motion blending, which covered the way both Agro and the colossi turned in a fluid and naturalistic way. This, combined with posture control, which was the fourth major pillar of *Shadow Of The Colossus*' biggest design challenges, meant that both Agro and the colossi stood on slopes, turned, ran and generally moved in a way that didn't break the illusion of the world.

All of these challenges were overcome to allow the majesty and spectacle of *Shadow Of The Colossus* to wow us unimpeded. Thanks to these technical achievements the incredible concept of having a game with only boss battles, where the giant adversaries were themselves the levels you had to overcome, in a desolate world that still managed to convey so much backstory and create so much intrigue, was accomplished. It should go without saying that open-world game design, emergent storytelling and boss-battle design have been massively influenced by what Team Ico and Fumito Ueda achieved with this stunning game. Even with all of the power and advancements of the last two generations, little can match *Shadow Of The Colossus* on its own terms, which was made all the more clear by the recent remake for PS4. For a game that tells you so little, it manages to convey so much and draw you into a deeply emotional and morally challenging experience. There is really nothing else quite like it in gaming, but we have no doubt that it will continue to inspire creators for years to come with how it executed its ideas so well.



KEY FACTS

- Fumito Ueda was lead designer, artist and creative director on *Shadow Of The Colossus* and has admitted his desire to be involved in every stage of the game-making process is part of what makes them take so long.

- The original concept of the game included 48 colossi that you would have to defeat and included multiplayer, but this was all cut down due to technical constraints.

- An unused item in the code of the game called The Eye of the Colossus would have allowed you to view battles from the perspective of the colossi.





GAME CHANGERS

EIGHT GAMES THAT FELT THE ICO EFFECT

THE INFLUENCE OF TEAM ICO HAS BEEN FELT FAR AND WIDE



TLOZ: BREATH OF THE WILD

Completing the circle of influence given Fumito Ueda's clear admiration for the Nintendo series in his own work, *Breath Of The Wild*'s Divine Beasts take the concept of bosses being levels to an even more literal conclusion, with each giant mechanical creature acting as its own dungeon. However, inverting the experience of *Colossus* somewhat, defeating the Beasts releases them of the dark force occupying them, turning them into allies.



DARK SOULS

Hidetaka Miyazaki's series draws from a great number of influences, but there are a couple of core concepts that feel very familiar to Team Ico games. First is the scale of the bosses, which are often gigantic compared to your avatar. The battles against these monsters are epic, although not necessarily tinged with as much regret at the end as with *Colossus*. There's also the element of the cursed protagonist.



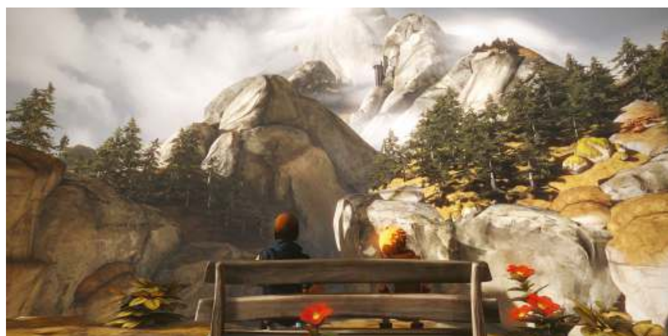
RIME

From our first viewing of *Rime* we felt that connection it had to *Ico*, with the isolated, possibly abandoned child in a remote location (an island rather than a castle here) attempting to find an escape and simultaneously unravel the mystery of what exactly is happening in this place. While we were all waiting on *The Last Guardian* to finally arrive, Tequila Works snuck in there with a gorgeous tribute to the spirit of Team Ico.



JOURNEY

Mechanically and in terms of features, *Journey* doesn't have much in common with a Team Ico production, but its world design and the way it reveals its narrative without words feels very close to *Shadow Of The Colossus*. *Journey* often feels like a desolate and abandoned place filled with the ruins of a once-great civilisation, but where *Colossus* saw despair, *Journey* appears to find hope, and is a much more uplifting experience.



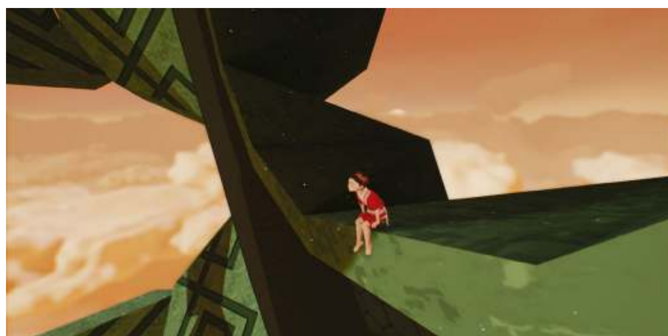
BROTHERS: A TALE OF TWO SONS

Director Josef Fares has openly stated his admiration of *Ico* as one of the first games to attempt to evoke emotions from its audience, and it seems logical that the inclusion of benches as save points in his game were a subtle nod to the sofa save points of *Ico*. Additionally, watching two children run around a ruined castle and dungeon solving puzzles feels very similar too, although *Brothers*' mechanics are significantly different. The emotional root connection remains strong.



MAJIN AND THE FORSAKEN KINGDOM

While it ultimately beat *The Last Guardian* to market by about six years, *Majin* was released around three years after the initial reveal of Fumito Ueda's *Shadow Of The Colossus* follow-up, and the similarity between the two concepts (human befriends giant creature and needs its co-operative help to solve puzzles) was difficult to deny. Of course it was denied, as the game was said to have been in development long before the reveal of Team Ico's third game, but the connection still feels strong to us.



OURE

Oure feels like a mixture of Team Ico concepts with other titles also inspired by those releases, most obviously *Journey*. We have the child protagonist, giant creatures made of stone and a relatively featureless, desolate landscape. The twist that *Oure* brings to the party is that your character can turn into a long, snake-like dragon and soar through the air. Once again it finds a more uplifting spirit within the concepts.



TITAN SOULS

This pixel-art indie execution of some of the core concepts of *Shadow Of The Colossus* was very well received on release, not least for the immense challenge its 19 titans offered. With only one arrow to use in attacks, defeating these bosses was a matter of patience and perseverance, not unlike solving the route to defeating the colossi. There's a little Dark Souls and Zelda mixed in there too.

65" Q7F 4K ULTRA HD PREMIUM HDR 1500 SMART QLED TV

MANUFACTURER: **SAMSUNG** PRICE: **£2,699**

TV technology is fast-moving and often packed full of a lot of jargon that rather disguises the minor leaps in innovation that are really taking place. Thankfully Samsung's most recent range of 4K TVs deliver real quality with some very smart features that are perfect for getting the best gaming experience for your bucks.

So, what are these features? The big one is the Q in the QLED tag of quantum-dot technology. This tech allows for more controlled colour dispersal from the LED backlighting on the screen, which means there's more controlled and intense colour on the screen than you might otherwise achieve from a typical LCD TV. For our purposes, that means exceptional HDR performance with the deepest and clearest possible performance on Xbox One X and PS4 Pro games. We tried it out with *Forza Horizon 3*, *God Of War* and *Horizon Zero Dawn* and found all three to look particularly good on Samsung's set. The blacks weren't always as deep as we would like, but for the size and price, it's still exceptional.

In terms of design and usability, it does very well. The bezel is very thin, giving you a fantastic edge-to-edge display, while the ambient mode is supposed to allow the TV to blend into your living room a little when not in use. The stand, should you not be mounting this TV on a wall, is very solid, and while there's a little wobble to the display in this set-up, that largely avoids any chance of it tipping. The external box for all the cables means everything is kept very neat and tidy, although you will need a place for this to sit in order to plug everything in. The long cable to the TV (which is very thin to minimise its visibility) means that your consoles and digital boxes could actually be well tucked away too.

In some respects, while the price is still pretty high, this is an entry-level set for 4K and HDR visuals for all of the features you're getting. In terms of image performance and connectivity, you could be paying a lot more for this quality.

www.samsung.com

VERDICT 9/10



We're increasingly of the opinion that 65" is the sweet spot for good 4K visuals, giving you plenty of scale for the action, but also tight enough for no detail to be lost.

We really like the use of this external box for all the cables to feed into. A single plug reaches into the back of the TV itself and is very thin so you can disguise it a little if you want.

GAMING CLOTHING



OSCAR'S ESTUS

Marking the fortunate (or perhaps unfortunate depending on your perspective) meeting with Oscar of Astora in *Dark Souls* and your first experience with an Estus flask, this tee represents one of the series' most iconic features.
www.insertcoinclothing.com



OMEN

We like the mixture of subtle and intense that this T-shirt offers. Like a well-presented mullet it's all business on the front with the smaller cog logo and then party on the back with a much larger incarnation. Simple grey tee with a dark design. Perfect.
www.insertcoinclothing.com



DAD OF BOY

Honouring a rather amusing meme that sprang from *God Of War*, that Kratos kept on referring to his son simply as Boy, we like how this design has incorporated the updated series logo into the text. Another simple idea, well executed.
www.insertcoinclothing.com

THEMED COLLECTION: MUST-HAVE VINYL



SHENMUE

PRICE: **£19.99**

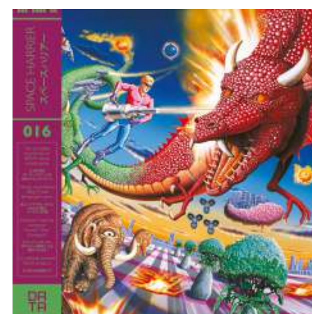
This classic orchestral soundtrack has been newly remastered for this first vinyl release with the classic boxart on the sleeve and available in a transluscent blue vinyl finish. It's a truly gorgeous soundtrack.
data-discs.com



OUTRUN

PRICE: **£19.99**

Remastered to mark *OutRun*'s 30th anniversary, this soundtrack release includes all of the original music from the 1986 arcade version of the game, as well as bonus tracks from the Mega Drive and Nintendo 3DS versions.
data-discs.com



SPACE HARRIER

PRICE: **£19.99**

Available in a dark-green vinyl finish as well as light-green and purple version that also comes with a lenticular cover (at a little extra cost) this is a fantastic collection of the music release for the first time on LP outside of Japan.
data-discs.com



CASTLEVANIA

PRICE: **$20**

Another release that marked a 30th anniversary. While the soundtrack is obviously fantastic, we have to say we like the cover art perhaps even more. The outer design is by Becky Cloonan and there's a great castle map inside.
mondotees.com



GOD OF WAR

PRICE: **$35**

Once again from the Mondo stable we have a wonderful package to complement the incredible soundtrack, this time composed by Bear McCreary with the artwork created by Jeff Langevin. A great way to extend your Kratos experience.
mondotees.com



PORTAL

PRICE: **$30**

As if the score to the Valve puzzler wasn't enough reason to be excited by this collection, then the 'magic wallet' design of this release might tip the balance. It can be opened from both sides. Aperture science trickery, no doubt.
mondotees.com



SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

PRICE: **$40**

Once again we're not sure what to be more blown away by, the soundtrack to this glorious game or the stunning piece of artwork that's been designed for this double LP release.
store.iam8bit.com



SKYRIM

PRICE: **$40**

Aled Lewis provides the art for this release. Of course Bethesda's soundtrack work is among the very best in the business, but so is the way Lewis incorporates the game's logo into its face-off between dragon and dragonborn.
store.iam8bit.com



NO MAN'S SKY

Price: **$25**

Whether you were into what Hello Games' game offered or not, we would highly recommend you listen to this soundtrack. Composed by 65daysofstatic, it's simply one of the best scores in recent memory.
store.iam8bit.com

PLAYING WITH SUPER POWER

PUBLISHER: **SCHIFFER PUBLISHING**

An officially licensed product for Nintendo, although written and compiled independently, *Playing With Super Power* benefits from a fan's eye for detail along with access to a fantastic archive on content around the SNES. Sebastian Haley does a great job of retelling the story of the design and emergence of Nintendo's 16-bit console with pages direct from *Nintendo Power* issues from back in the day as well as behind-the-scenes design documents, character art and much more that you will likely find very interesting to browse.

Once we get into the games we're immediately treated to massive, level-long panoramic images from *Super Mario World*, as well as some fantastic insight into the development process of the game and artwork. Similar multi-page treatments are given to *F-Zero, A Link To The Past, Super Mario Kart, Star Fox* and the other games on the US SNES Mini.

A closing section on the SNES's super fans chronicles the lasting, living community of players who continue to celebrate the console's games and characters through artwork, performances and fan sites.

While it may not be the most comprehensive look at the legacy of the SNES out there, its focus is actually its greatest strength. There's access and insight here that any fan of the console will find enjoyable, and while not every game gets a mention, those that do are treated with so much reverence that you'll be charmed by them all over again.

The overall quality, especially of the hardback edition, is clear, with a nice mix of modern, simple design working well with the retro inserts from *Nintendo Power* and all that classic art. A really top-notch collection for SNES fans.



www.primagames.com VERDICT 9/10



OVERWATCH: WORLD GUIDE

A great companion to the game for fans, this book gives you the backstory and important game info behind all of *Overwatch*'s key heroes. You can learn about each of them and the weapons they bring to the battlefield. Oh, and there's a poster in there too. Not bad at all.

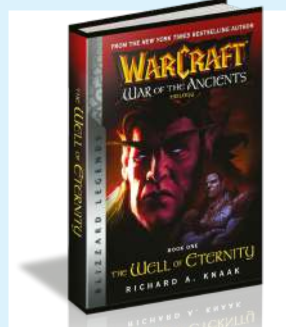
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STARCRAFT: THE DARK TEMPLAR SAGA: FIRSTBORN

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